The irregular at magic high school
魔法科高校の劣等生 9
来訪者編〈上〉
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魔法科高校の劣等生⑨
来訪者編<上>

深雪のクラスメイトである北山雫が、USNA（北アメリカ大陸合衆国）に留学することになった。この時代、ハイレベルの魔法師は、遺伝子の流出＝軍事資源の流出を避ける為に、政府によって海外渡航を制限（禁止）されている。にもかかわらず許可された理由、それは『交換留学』だからだ。

アンジェリーナ＝クドウ＝シールズ。

雫がアメリカに渡り、入れ替わりで魔法科高校に入学したのは、金髪碧眼の留学生。彼女を見た達也は、瞬時にその『正体』に気づく。

リーナの本当の姿、それは大規模破壊兵器に匹敵する戦略級魔法師「十三使徒」の一人、USNAの魔法師部隊『スターズ』総隊長、アンジー・シリウス少佐。

魔法科高校にやってきた米軍最強の魔法師という『火の粉』を、達也はどう振り払うのか——。

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魔法科高校の劣等生⑨
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魔法科高校の劣等生 9

The irregular at magic high school

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光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。光を操る光波振動系魔法を得意とする。思い込みがやや激しいタイプ。
「リーナ、あんまり勝ち負けなんて考えない方が良いと思うけど」
「競い合うことは大切よ。例え実習でも勝ち負けには拘った方が上達すると思うわ」
アンジェリーナ＝クドウ＝シールズ
Angelina=Kudou=Shields
北山雫との『交換留学』で魔法科高校にやってきたUSNA（北アメリカ大陸合衆国）の高校生。類い希なる魔法技術を持つ、金髪碧眼の美少女。
司波深雪
しば・みゆき
司波兄妹の妹。1年A組所属。魔法科高校に主席で入学したエリート。『花冠（ブルーム）』と呼ばれる一科生徒で、得意分野は『冷却魔法』。唯一の愛すべき欠点は『重度のブラコン』。

「痛えじゃねえか！」
西城レオンハルト
さいじょう・れおんはると
通称「レオ」。達也と同じく一年E組所属。父親がハーフ、母親がクォーター。『硬化魔法』を得意とする。
「君たちに私は倒せない」
吸血鬼
きゅうけつき
夜闇に紛れ、魔法師たちの血液を抜き取る謎の存在。
「スターズ総隊長の権限により、貴方を処断します」
アンジー・シリウス
Angie Sirius
USNAの魔法師部隊『スターズ』総隊長。階級は少佐。戦略級魔法師「十三使徒」の一人でもある。
千葉エリカ
ちば・えりか
達也のクラスメイト。明るい性格で、周囲も巻き込むトラブルメーカー。実家は剣技と魔法の複合戦闘術である『剣術』の大家である。
「ミキはコートの方を。あたしは仮面を抑える！」
「簡単に行かないのはコッチも同じだ」
吉田幹比古
よしだ・みきひこ
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。古式魔法の名家。エリカとは幼少時からの顔見知り。

「絶対に、負けられない！」

「全力で叩き潰す！」

2095年現在の世界情勢

世界の寒冷化を直接の契機とする第三次世界大戦、二〇年世界群発戦争により世界の地図は大きく塗り替えられた。現在の状況は以下のとおり。

ＵＳＡはカナダ及びメキシコからパナマまでの諸国を併合して北アメリカ大陸合衆国（ＵＳＮＡ）を形成。

ロシアはウクライナ、ベラルーシを再吸収して新ソビエト連邦（新ソ連）を形成。

中国はビルマ北部、ベトナム北部、ラオス北部、朝鮮半島を征服して大亜細亜連合（大亜連合）を形成。

インドとイランは中央アジア諸国（トルクメニスタン、ウズベキスタン、タジキスタン、アフガニスタン）及び南アジア諸国（パキスタン、ネパール、ブータン、バングラデシュ、スリランカ）を呑み込んでインド・ペルシア連邦を形成。

他のアジア・アラブ諸国は地域ごとに軍事同盟を締結し新ソ連、大亜連合、インド・ペルシアの三大国に対抗。

オーストラリアは事実上の鎖国を選択。

ＥＵは統合に失敗し、ドイツとフランスを境に東西分裂。東西ＥＵも統合国家の形成に至らず、結合は戦前よりむしろ弱体化している。

アフリカは諸国の半分が国家ごと消滅し、生き残った国家も辛うじて都市周辺の支配権を維持している状態となっている。

南アメリカはブラジルを除き地方政府レベルの小国分立状態に陥っている。

戦略級魔法師・十三使徒

現代魔法は高度な科学技術の中で育まれてきたものである為、軍事的に強力な魔法の開発が可能な国家は限られている。その結果、大規模破壊兵器に匹敵する戦略級魔法を開発できたのは一握りの国家だった。

ただ開発した魔法を同盟国に供与することは行われており、戦略級魔法に高い適性を示した同盟国の魔法師が戦略級魔法師として認められている例もある。

2095年4月段階で、国家により戦略級魔法に適性を認められ対外的に公表された魔法師は13名。彼らは十三使徒と呼ばれ、世界の軍事バランスの重要ファクターと見なされていた。十三使徒の所属国、氏名、戦略級魔法の名称は以下のとおり。

USNA
アンジー・シリウス：「ヘビィ・メタル・バースト」
エリオット・ミラー：「リヴァイアサン」
ローラン・バルト：「リヴァイアサン」
※この中でスターズに所属するのはアンジー・シリウスのみであり、エリオット・ミラーはアラスカ基地、ローラン・バルトは国外のジブラルタル基地から基本的に動くことはない。

新ソビエト連邦
イーゴリ・アンドレイビッチ・ペゾプラゾフ：「トゥマーン・ボンバ」
レオニード・コンドラチェンコ：「シムリャー・アールミヤ」
※コンドラチェンコは高齢の為、黒海基地から基本的に動くことはない。

大亜細亜連合
劉雲徳（りゅううんとく）「霹靂塔」
※劉雲徳は2095年10月31日の対日戦闘で戦死している。

インド・ペルシア連邦
パラット・チャンドラ・カーン：「アグニ・ダウンバースト」

日本
五輪 澪（いつわ・みお）：「深淵（アビス）」

ブラジル
ミゲル・ディアス：「シンクロライナー・フュージョン」
※魔法式はＵＳＮＡより供与されたもの。

イギリス
ウィリアム・マクロード：「オゾンサークル」

ドイツ
カーラ・シュミット：「オゾンサークル」
※オゾンサークルはオゾンホール対策として分裂前のＥＵで共同研究された魔法を原型としており、イギリスで完成した魔法式が協定により旧ＥＵ諸国に公開された。

トルコ
アリ・シャーヒーン：「バハムート」
※魔法式はＵＳＮＡと日本の共同で開発されたものであり、日本主導で供与された。

タイ
ソム・チャイ・ブンナーク：「アグニ・ダウンバースト」
※魔法式はインド・ペルシアより供与されたもの。

Chapter 0

The National Particle Accelerator Lab was located in Dallas, Texas in the USNA (not the northern part of the United States, but the United States that encompassed all of Northern America). At a full length of 30 km, the linear particle accelerator was preparing to experiment with micro black hole creation and evaporation based on the Hawking radiation theory.

In reality, preparations had already been completed two years ago, but the reason why this project was restarted despite its failure to receive approval due to its comparatively large unknown risks was because of what happened in the Far East sector near end of last month.

A titanic explosion eradicated the military harbor located on the southern tip of the Korean peninsula and the fleet stationed there within an instant. This was not just a simple event, but worthy of rating a major crisis.

This was not because of the scale of destruction, but because of the estimated instrument of this carnage.

After fierce debate among the scientists from the Department of National Defense, the cause of the detonation was determined to be matter conversion. Three years ago, only a small portion of the scholars stood by this, but this time there was consensus among the researchers.

By tracing back the estimated scale of the explosion, the amount of matter transmuted into energy was roughly 1 kg. —Although matter conversion on such a large scale had never been detected before, but since they already used an experimental device to record the annihilation reaction, they were able to use that to deduce what had occurred.

What required an explanation was that, based on the data of the "titanic explosion" recorded by the satellites, the distinctive properties of the annihilation reaction did not match those created under experimental conditions. Nor did they detect any debris left behind by nuclear fission or fusion. In other words, regardless of whether through the advent of some technology or magical power, someone utilized a previously unknown method to create a practical application for high energy explosions.

This result gave the upper echelons of the USNA fits.

If this was caused by magic, then they could hardly bemoan the fact that no one could replicate this achievement. While the magic system itself was systematic, ultimately human genes were the dominant property.

However, there was simply no way to craft any countermeasures if they had no idea how this phenomenon was achieved in the first place.

Once an enemy turned this upon them, the only path remaining to them was complete destruction.

This was a nightmare come to life.

How was the explosion brought about, the keys to the matter and energy conversion system, were these beyond their grasp..... Yet, this was precisely the impetus that revitalized the micro black hole creation and evaporation experiment.

In regards to the observable effect from matter to energy conversion from black hole evaporation, the theoretical proof was sound. The micro black hole experiment itself was designed to bring these theories to fruition. And then there was the matter of how the data from the "titanic explosion" differed from experimental estimates.

Still, according to the predictions from USNA scientists, although the annihilation effect did not match up perfectly with the experimental observation of Hawking radiation, there was still the possibility of obtaining a result that was completely different from theoretical estimates.

In summation, there was a chance that they could observe the same distinctive properties observed during the "titanic explosion". The probability of this was not zero.

The fact that this flimsy possibility was enough to reopen such a dangerous and risky experiment was a clear testament to how desperate the upper echelons of the USNA had become.

To the point that they could ignore the dangers of the unknown.

The result of such a decision was encroaching towards them, nay, the entire world.

This hitherto undetected disaster was creeping closer.

Chapter 1

There was still one month left in the year 2095 AD.

Thinking back, this was quite the chaotic year. As he thought over the past year, even Tatsuya couldn't help but fall into a reverie. The terrorists in April, the international criminal organization in August, then came the foreign invaders during October. Even the word "turbulent" should have a limit.

Still, Tatsuya did not possess the leisure to ruminate and reflect over the year gone by. This was hardly because he bore any pessimistic outlook like "there's still one month left, who knows what could happen". Rather, he had a more practical reason before him.

"......Wah-! I still don't understand no matter how many times it's been said!"

"Keep it to yourself! There's no need to holler! Just suck it up!"

"Relax, Leo-kun, Erika-chan....."

No matter if one was a middle school student, high school student, or college student, so long as they were students, this was undoubtedly their most loathed nemesis. The unavoidable obstacle that they were forced to overcome. —The inevitable final exams that were just around the corner.

The usual crowd was currently gathered in Shizuku's house — more like a mansion, to be precise.

Tatsuya, Miyuki, Erika, Leo, Mizuki, Mikihiko, Honoka, Shizuku, everyone was here and engaged in the study session in preparation for the upcoming final exams.

Despite calling this a study session, the group assembled here were largely quite capable on the written portion of the exam. The only exception here was Leo, whose grades were only so-so, but still in no danger of failing. The area of grave concern was actually the technical skills portion, but that was not being covered in the study session.

Besides from the odd squawk here and there, the mood of the study session closely mirrored that of a colloquial tea party. —That is, until Shizuku dropped the bombshell.

"Eh? Shizuku, can you repeat that one more time?"

"I'm actually preparing to study overseas in America."

Honoka asked in a frantic manner while Shizuku replied in her usual bland tone.

"But I never heard about that!?"

"Sorry, I was forbidden from disclosing that until yesterday."

Seeing the completely pale Honoka press on with more questions, Shizuku's head dropped in a clear sign of guilt. Plainly, Shizuku wanted to tell them from long ago, so in that light, Honoka didn't push her any further.

"However, are you seriously able to study overseas?"

Honoka's question was not questioning Shizuku's ability.

In the modern age, in order to prevent high-class Magicians, and especially their genetics as well as military capabilities, from drifting overseas, various governments heavily restricted unofficial international travel.

The USNA remained allies on the surface, but in reality they were one of the country's direct competitors in the western Pacific. Hence the typical request to study abroad in America was usually denied.

In other words, saying that she was studying abroad in America hinted at tacit approval.

"Ah, well, we've already received approval. Father said that this was because this was a foreign exchange, or something like that."

"So foreign exchange students are automatically qualified?"

"Who knows?"

Although Mizuki's question seemed reasonable, any hope of a positive response died when Shizuku tilted her head and replied back. Even Tatsuya was unable to follow any logic that granted special exceptions to foreign exchange students.

"For how long? When do you leave?"

While he wanted to properly analyze the situation, there was simply too little information on hand. Tatsuya frankly gave up on any meaningless pondering and focused back on the situation before him.

"I leave after the end of the term. The duration is three months."

"So it's only three months..... Don't scare us like that."

Honoka heaved a sigh of relief after hearing Shizuku's words. It looked like she was expecting this to be a long-term arrangement.

However, according to Tatsuya's "common knowledge", even three months was quite a long duration (was there some backroom dealing that led to government ratification).

Nonetheless, that wasn't important right now.

"Then we need to prepare a proper farewell party."

So, Tatsuya proposed "something that had to be done" to his friends.

◊ ◊ ◊

The final exams came and went without any disturbance. Today was Saturday, December 24th. Today was the last day of the second semester and also Christmas Eve.

Since the Third World War until now, the Japanese citizenry remained indifferent towards religion. This was hardly because this was a country of atheists, but more because they subconsciously attributed the one true god that others believed in to be one of the myriad spirits in the world. Thus, there were always preparations for celebratory events, regardless of whether it was the lunar new year or Christmas.

The streets were filled with Christmas cheer.

Every shop was engaged in the annual Christmas mercantile warfare, although even if this was the true topic of the season, simply shopping around by oneself definitely rated as a foolish decision. Setting aside the people who hadn't found someone yet, if someone decided to throw a hissy fit because they weren't surrounded by cute girls at this time and ruined the mood for their friends who were enjoying the atmosphere, a beating would likely be unavoidable. (Of course, that's only the masculine

side of things. Young ladies probably want to be "surrounded by strapping young lads".)

So..... Even if this was the "farewell party", they still chose to hold it on December 24th. Right now, there was a giant cream cake in front of them with a chocolate plaque that had the words "Merry X'mas" on it. No matter what, this gave off an odd feeling. .....To top it off, according to this restaurant's style, Christmas should be spelled with "Weihnachten" rather than "X'mas". Still, this was perfectly charming in its own way.

"Onii-sama, what's on your mind?"

Eyeing his sister, who managed to bloom like a flower despite being garbed in her school uniform, Tatsuya shook his head to signify that "it was nothing".

Indeed, in reality he couldn't simply write it off as nothing. Still, he was being invited as a participant, so he couldn't ruin the mood for the main act.

"Has everyone gotten their drinks? Then, although this is slightly off kilter from the main theme of a farewell party, but since we rarely get such an exquisitely prepared cake, bottoms up everyone..... Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas!"

Using the clinking of the cups to join the well wishers, Tatsuya responded to his friends' cries and raised his glass along with everyone else.

In front of the Cafe "Eine Brise", a "Reserved" sign hung from the entrance.

◊ ◊ ◊

In central North America on the other side of the Pacific, this was still the day before Christmas Eve. The time was about to turn to the 24th.

Compared to the majority of Japanese who viewed Christmas as a simple celebratory event, those that went through the 20 year long war, or more like the Americans who survived that catastrophe and especially for the new "Americans" after the war, these people embraced Christmas with sincerity, devotion, and gratitude. In order to prepare for Christmas Eve on the morrow, everyone went to bed early. —At least, that's how it was supposed to be.

In the deepest night before Christmas Eve, several figures were flashing across the street corners of one of the great cities in southern America, Dallas, Texas.

Several more figures leaped across the rooftops from one building to another.

Additionally, several more formed a containment net in the air used against suspicious individuals. Given that they were equipped with Specialized CADs loaded with Flying-Type Magic that hadn't even hit the market yet, they were probably law enforcement or combat Magicians.

"Halt, Lieutenant Alfred Fomalhaut! You know you have nowhere to flee!"

Standing in front of the fleeing individual, a petite figure wearing a mask that covered the eyes barred their path.

It was the tinkling voice of a young girl that called for surrender. The fugitive, Alfred Fomalhaut, immediately came to a halt upon seeing that tiny figure.

"......What happened? Fred, you are someone who has received the First Class Star of Honor, so why are you deserting?"

The earlier arrogant tone altered. This time, the masked young girl's voice contained the unease, bewilderment, and childish tones that were expected of her image.

"....."

Yet, the other side gave no reply.

"There was a series of arson and homicides along this street said to be caused by your Pyrokinesis. That must be a joke, right?"

"....."

"Answer me, Freddy!"

However, the response the other side gave came not in the form of words.

The young girl quickly leaped backwards.

The only thing she left behind was the cloak she wore on her shoulders.

Without any warning, the cloak that covered the young girl's body erupted into flames and was burned to ash.

Pyrokinesis — the fire starter ability.

This was not modern magic from any system, but a special power that was once known as a Superpower.

The cloak that the young girl wore over her purple uniform and the easily removable windbreakers and cloaks that the surrounding men wore were not to defend against the cold, but to block their physical bodies from the man's direct line of sight and magic.

The second the flames vanished, every light in the man's surroundings winked out.

Setting the target as the origin, every light source within a certain radius was reversed so that no outside light could penetrate this prison of pitch darkness. This was the area of effect magic "Mirror Cage".

One of the surrounding individuals activated this defensive ability to deny the target any visuals.

"Lieutenant Fomalhaut, in accordance with the special provision granted under federal military law and under my own authority as the commanding officer of Stars, I hereby enact your punishment!"

This declaration was made as if in lamentation.

The masked young girl, Major Angie Sirius, commanding officer of the Stars, raised the automatic pistol equipped with a silencer and aimed at Lieutenant Fomalhaut, who was still imprisoned within the magically created cell of darkness.

Empowered by Data Fortification to ignore all magic interference, the bullet pierced through Lieutenant Fomalhaut's heart as he stood trapped within the dark barrier.

◊ ◊ ◊

Despite calling this a farewell party, since they knew that they would be reunited in the spring after the trip and that this kind of study abroad

sessions weren't usually approved, rather than being lonely, it would be more appropriate to say that there were more expectations in the air.

"Hey, where are you going for your study abroad program?"

"Berkeley."

At Erika's question, Shizuku only replied back with a single word. This was not because Shizuku was in a dark mood, but because that's how her personality was.

"So it's not Boston."

Among Japanese Magicians, the belief that the center of America's modern magic research facilities was Boston ran deep. Miyuki's comment came from this particular background.

"That's because the East Coast isn't very stable right now."

"Ah, the 'Human Ideologists' are rampaging over there. We see them on the news quite often these days."

Mikihiko agreed wholeheartedly with Shizuku's reply.

"So the witch hunts have now turned into 'Magician hunts'. Even if you say history repeats itself, this is simply ridiculous."

Leo coldly retorted.

"It's not a perfect replication of history. Although we have no idea of the background of the 17th century's witch hunts, the recent 'Magician hunts' and new white supremacist movement are fundamentally two different things."

Tatsuya chimed in with a more conciliatory tone.

"Still, it may be best to avoid the East Coast."

Not that Tatsuya's words were meant to defend the "Magician hunts" in any way.

"I didn't know about that."

Miyuki interjected while visually prompting her brother to continue. Catching his sister's request, Tatsuya continued onward.

"This is because the rosters for both organizations shared quite a few members. However, the member rosters are not something open to the public, so it's only natural to be ignorant of this detail."

"I smell criminal activity in Tatsuya-kun's words..... Let's table this disturbing conversation here."

Seeing Erika intentionally crack a joke and shake her head, both Tatsuya and Miyuki chuckled wryly and nodded.

The two of them both knew that this was not the right time and place for that conversation topic.

"Do you know any details about the exchange student?"

Possibly because she wanted to quickly alter the atmosphere, Miyuki's change in subject was a little abrupt.

"Exchange?"

"The child that will be the exchange student at our school."

As expected, Shizuku initially missed the meaning behind Miyuki's words until Miyuki repeated herself before letting out an "Ah" along with an comprehending expression. —But, as usual, it was difficult to discern her change in expression.

"I believe it's a girl of the same age."

"So you don't know anything else?"

"Yeah."

Is that it? Everyone looked at one another blankly. Tatsuya chuckled as he asked this question while Shizuku nodded her head as if this was perfectly natural.

"......That's true. No matter how much you cared, it's not like they would tell you who was going to cross over in your place."

With Mizuki's comment, this topic came to a close.

Based on the fact that they selected today for their farewell party, the eight people gathered here didn't seem to have any special plans for Christmas Eve. Still, it was a little surprising to see that Shizuku, Erika, and Mikihiko were not obligated to attend any family gatherings, which hinted that the Kitayama, Chiba, and Yoshida Families probably held galas for the adults, events where high school freshmen were not required to attend. —And not because their parents made specific arrangements.

Faced with the temptation of unrestrained freedom, they would have liked to party late into the night and deepen their friendship, but since they were all wearing their school uniforms, they wouldn't be able to stay out too late.

"I think the owner will get a little sour if we stay any longer."

Such an innocent, but at the same time slightly wicked, phrase stumped the owner of the cafe. (Who said this aloud was irrelevant.) The eight of them packed up their things and prepared to head home.

Honoka and Shizuku took the same bus, so she must be staying over at Shizuku's place. At any rate, this wasn't any new headline at magic high schools, though the primary reason was because Honoka wasn't very close with her parents.

Erika, Leo, Mizuki, and Mikihiko each got onto a train. There was expectation of some theatrics on their part, but plainly these four were a long ways off from that point.

Finally, Tatsuya and Miyuki climbed onto another train without any further concern and happily enjoyed their ride home together. While modern cabins had been designed into private compartments after request, Tatsuya never forgot the ancient maxim "the walls have ears". Furthermore, Miyuki didn't have anything to say either as they wordlessly returned home. The real conversation could only begin when the two of them were able to relax in their own home.

"I somehow feel that something is awry with Shizuku's study abroad program."

After changing clothes in their respective rooms, Miyuki poured two cups of coffee and the two of them sat side by side on the sofa before Miyuki finally broached her own thoughts.

"Awry..... You do have a point."

Tatsuya shifted his coffee mug from his lips and, under her brother's silent urging, Miyuki hesitantly listed her skepticism.

"First of all, the idea that such a magically talented individual like Shizuku could obtain permission to study abroad is already unnatural. That being said, this might fly if she was studying abroad as the daughter of a major entrepreneur and not as a Magician-in-training, but our complete lack of knowledge on the transfer student is too suspicious. Furthermore, specifically selecting this moment to suddenly spring an exchange program smacks of an ulterior purpose. It's almost as if....."

"As if they're trying to secretly sound us out? According to Oba-sama, we are under suspicion."

Tatsuya smirked slightly and continued on as if he was talking about someone else's business.

"Material Burst. Looks like we can't just leave this situation alone."

Once she heard the heavy subject that she was unable to utter spring forth from her brother's lips, Miyuki's eyes widened in shock but, at the same time, she seemed to relax into a smile.

"Is that so..... Looks like Onii-sama already took this into consideration."

"Setting aside the student exchange situation for the moment, after taking into account Oba-ue's warnings, this is most definitely not a simple coincidence."

Tatsuya already disclosed the conversation between himself and Maya to Miyuki the day it happened. Exactly why he was under suspicion and who was targeting him.

"Then, is it really Stars.....?"

"In that case, being forbidden from making contact with the Major makes this a little difficult."

As punishment for Tatsuya activating Strategic-class magic without obtaining permission beforehand, Maya forbade him from making contact with the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion. Although he didn't plan on obediently following orders to the letter, but in order to avoid undue risk, following orders was the smarter move at the moment.

"Even if we asked Oba-sama..... She probably wouldn't tell us anything."

"And given that the exchange program has already been ratified, this signifies that Oba-ue has already agreed to this arrangement."

The Yotsuba Family currently matched the Saegusa Family, who led the Ten Master Clans, so there was no way they would be in the dark about talented Magicians undergoing the foreign exchange program.

"On the other hand, this isn't a completely negative turnout for us. Even if the opponent they sent was just to sound us out, Oba-ue wouldn't underestimate them. Rather, there might have been some troublesome turn of events on the American side. Oba-ue's intent is likely to have us catch them by the tail instead."

Rather than being a wry grin, Tatsuya's smile was closer to that of a helpless smile.

"We cannot be certain that is how the situation will unfold..... It will do us no good to overthink this."

"That's true. You're absolutely right, Miyuki."

No matter what was said, both the comforting side and the comforted side knew that these words were enough to truly let them relax.

◊ ◊ ◊

After taking the Stars exclusive VTOL aircraft back to base and making her report to the Joint Chiefs of Staff via encrypted communications, Major Angelina Sirius, also known as Angie Sirius, was still in her uniform as she rolled back and forth on the bed in her room.

She flipped over and buried her face into the pillow.

No matter how many times she performed them, she still couldn't get used to Search and Destroy missions. While she didn't vomit like she did after first completing this mission, that was only because her physical body had become accustomed to her mental pain.

Yet her mental suffering only worsened.

An American Magician, a Stars member under the direct command of the USNA Joint Chiefs of Staff, who was her comrade on multiple levels, had just been executed by her own hands.

When she heard that this was the duty of the High Commander, the one who was bestowed the title Sirius, she didn't have any real feelings on the matter.

Even if this was a high honor, she still didn't comprehend. She still didn't comprehend the meaning behind killing her own comrades.

She turned over once again and used her hand to cover her eyes from the piercing light. It was only then she realized she forgot to turn off the lights.

At this moment, the doorbell rang. Major Sirius's lips curled into a wry smile.

Looks like tonight, her meddlesome subordinate was checking in on her.

Stars consisted of twelve units, each led by a captain and then the High Commander. Her subordinate was exactly one such captain responsible for taking care of their own unit.

Originally, he should have no time to interfere with her business—

"Come in."

Getting up from the bed, Major Sirius keyed the mic leading to the door and made a simple reply before hitting the remote to open the door.

"Sorry for disturbing you, High Commander."

The one who came in was the expected individual.

Major Benjamin Canopus, call sign "Two" within Stars, captain of the first unit and de facto High Commander when she was absent.

Positions within Stars did not necessarily correlate with military rank, which was a rather odd arrangement for a military unit. It was unheard of for a captain to outrank the High Commander, but it was quite common to see the High Commander and the captains to share the same rank.

Currently, besides the six who held the rank of captain, the other six shared the same rank of major with the High Commander.

If Major Sirius had to voice her displeasure, it was that Canopus was plainly much older than she was yet held the same rank, which actually served to make her uneasy.

"Consolation prize."

Major Benjamin Canopus looked every inch the high ranking officer. A tough but vigorous man in his forties, the atmosphere around him was completely unlike the soldiers or civilian industrialists who clawed their way through the ranks.

"Ben, thanks."

There was a steaming cup of honey milk on the table next to the bed. Major Sirius easily accepted the condolences from her subordinate, who was the same age as her father.

This wasn't one of those glasses used as munitions during combat operations, but a beautiful mug with warm milk with honey that came straight from a thermos. Major Sirius lightly raised the mug and took a sip.

The warm sweetness gradually spread across her taste buds, and the pain in her heart seemed to lessen with it.

"You're welcome. High Commander, are you finished preparing?"

Major Canopus glanced at the personal luggage lumped together in one corner of the room and asked.

"Yes, pretty much."

"You cleaned up quite nicely."

"I am a girl, after all."

Major Canopus shrugged as he exchanged words with someone who would be the same age as his daughter. He actually had a daughter who was two years younger than her.

"The fact that you care about something inconsequential like your gender..... Is that because of your Japanese ancestry?"

"The idea that politeness and decorum is expected of Japanese people is completely outdated."

When the other person mentioned her quarter Japanese ancestry, this time it was Major Sirius's turn to shrug.

Not out of irritation.

Someone who quibbled over trivial matters like this wasn't going to last in Stars.

"You have a point, though let's set that aside for now..... Right now, just forget about your mission for a moment and get some quality R&R!"

"This isn't a furlough, but a secret mission....."

Major Sirius pouted when faced with Major Canopus's merry lecture.

That expression perfectly befitted the mood of a young girl her age.

"I should say it's rather depressing instead. Sending me to investigate whether the suspected target is the Strategic-class Magician. It's one thing if one of the two was the person in question, but there's a sizable possibility that both of them are not who we're looking for. Why are they sending me to undertake infiltration that isn't my specialty..... Even if we have to consider age as a requirement, there should be lots of people with specialist training for this."

The mission given to Major Sirius was to investigate the culprit behind the titanic explosion observed in the Far East sector at the end of October that was suspected to be caused by Strategic-class magic, which was essentially the true identity of the Magician. Intel tried their best and narrowed down the list of suspects to 51 targets, and among them were two students attending high school in Tokyo. In light of this, Major Sirius was ordered to go undercover because of their similar age (which was purely coincidental).

"Hey, don't be like that."

In order to comfort his sighing superior officer, Major Canopus waved his hand back and forth.

"I suspect the Joint Chiefs expect this opponent to be extremely difficult. If the target is truly an existence along the lines of our predictions, then that would make them a dangerous opponent with the firepower to exceed a tactical nuke. Furthermore, we are still in the dark regarding their identity. This way, it's not hard to sympathize with the Joint Chiefs using pure combat ability rather than training as a criterion when selecting the intelligence officer for this op."

"I get that."

"Since our suspected target is a high school student, establishing contact as a student from the same school would be much easier, so the only person who could possibly accomplish this investigation would be you, High Commander."

Although this was a matter of fact, in reality, there was a host of support personnel working in the shadows to help Major Sirius make contact with the target. Stars was also sending a planet-class Magician to support the major. There was no way that she could be oblivious to all that.

"I understand that as well."

Hence Major Sirius's response took this all in stride.

"Why don't you think about it like this. The High Commander's mission is to make contact with the suspicious target and cause him or her to waver."

"Hm..... That's a much better way to approach this. After all, I'm completely inept at intel work."

"In that case, go ahead and relax a little. There's nothing wrong in being a little more cheerful. This will likely make it easier to find our opponent's weakness as well."

"Ha..... That's true. Hopefully it'll turn out just like you say, Ben."

After letting out a heavy sigh, Major Sirius set the mug back onto the table and stood up in front of Major Canopus.

"Ben, I will leave the defenses up to you. The rest of the deserters haven't been dealt with yet, so the task that was originally my responsibility will have to fall to you..... However, the only person I can count on is you."

"Be at ease, High Commander. This is a little early, but I wish you godspeed."

At Major Canopus's affectionate smile and salute, the young lady returned a heartfelt smile of gratitude.

Chapter 2

As in the past, Tatsuya and Miyuki welcomed New Year's Day for 2096 AD together.

This year, their father also spent the evening at the dwelling of his first love. This actually did not make the situation more awkward for Tatsuya and Miyuki, so there were no complaints.

Neither Tatsuya nor Miyuki were the type to laze about on the holidays. Tatsuya rose at the usual time for school and waited at the threshold for Miyuki, only raising his head when he heard her call out "Sorry for the wait".

Wearing a long-sleeved, crimson kimono with white flowers, Miyuki gracefully descended down the stairs.

The pearly skin, unadorned with any extraneous makeup, only served to heighten the brilliant red of her succulent lips.

Her silky tresses done up with a hairpin might give off a childish feeling, but that only served to bring out the unique allure of a young maiden in the midst of the mature wardrobe.

In addition, what drew the eyes was not just the products of nature.

Kimonos of the past were designed to confine the chest area, whereas modern designs incorporated a 3-D cut off method. However, the traditional kimono Miyuki wore miraculously tightened the bust and waist area while still keeping with tradition and maintaining a modest appearance.

The breathtaking sight of the world's cutest younger sister — these were Tatsuya's true feelings — appeared to be seeking her older brother's praise.

"Hm, simply beautiful."

Standing in front of his sister while she was putting on her shoes, Tatsuya held nothing back with his praise.

Miyuki's face immediately flushed crimson.

"Seriously, Onii-sama... Don't tease me any more."

Despite her embarrassment, she did not shift her gaze and playfully pouted at her brother. A lesser man with a weaker immune system would have been annihilated instantly.

"I am not joking in the slightest... Well, let's be off."

To be able to be the master of himself even under such conditions, no wonder Tatsuya was the Onii-sama who had lived together with Miyuki for the past 16 years (to be precise, it was the past 15 years and 9 months).

There was an automated car parked outside the door. Nonetheless, an automated vehicle did not imply that no one was on board. The four seater car had an adult male and adult female sitting in the back row.

"Happy New Year, master."

"Happy New Year, Kokonoe-sensei. Please take care of us in the coming year as well."

Seeing Tatsuya's simplistic greeting and Miyuki's decorous bow, Yakumo replied with a cheerful smile of his own.

"Aya, you're even more beautiful than usual. Almost as if the divine descended from heaven. If they saw Miyuki today, even the fairies of Sumeru would hide their faces in shame."

On some level, this was a response filled with Yakumo's unique flavor.

"Master... I don't think that is what you're supposed to say."

The one who retorted so was the woman next to him.

Seeing that someone stole a march on him, Tatsuya slightly lowered his head to the woman before Yakumo could fire back a response.

"Ono-sensei, Happy New Year. Still, would it be alright if someone saw you with master?"

"Happy New Year, Shiba-kun. First day of the new year and this unpleasant already."

Originally, Tatsuya was truly getting a little worried, but it appeared that Haruka was already getting sick of him. Thinking back to his usual

behavior and previous run-ins, Tatsuya shrugged as he came to the conclusion that "being misunderstood couldn't be helped".

"Meeting sensei here was purely coincidental. Today, I am serving as your guide."

"I see, so that's how it is. Still, if calling a high school student, a guide is pushing it a little... Then that earlier honorific 'sensei' may be a little problematic."

At Tatsuya's words, Haruka furrowed her brows from the back seat.

Indeed, for a modern high school student, a single day visit to the shrine did not necessitate an adult chaperon.

Simply put, a "guide" was just an excuse, as the actual purpose was for them to "accompany" them.

Furthermore, even for random bystanders, since he was not a faculty member, using the honorific "sensei" might easily lead to terrifying delusions that lay in perilous territory.

"Let's think about it as we go. Shouldn't we be leaving now?"

Miyuki made this suggestion after Tatsuya opened the car door. Without paying any heed to the ruminating Haruka, Tatsuya waited until Miyuki boarded the vehicle, closed the door, and took his seat in the driver's seat. After Tatsuya closed the door, the car automatically took off.

After switching onto the train at the station despite unprecedented attention, the four of them got off at the meeting place again under intense scrutiny and walked for five minutes.

"Hey, Miyuki, you look great!"

This was the first sentence that greeted Tatsuya and Miyuki at the meeting place. Wearing a leather jacket over her long dress, Mizuki was gazing at Miyuki, mesmerized. To the side, even Tatsuya was under suspiciously warm scrutiny.

"Happy New Year, Shiba-kun. Your attire suits you, how unexpected."

Dressed in a kimono, just like Miyuki, Honoka seemed to be slightly cowed by her classmate's loveliness, but upon catching sight of Tatsuya's plain but altogether different aura, her heartbeat spiked and she immediately took on a coy smile.

"Happy New Year. Honoka looks great too."

Tatsuya wasn't just offering empty flattery. He honestly believed that Honoka's kimono was exquisite.

Tatsuya smiled slightly at the ecstatic Honoka and lowered his gaze to his own clothes.

"Since you mentioned this was unexpected, do I really look that out of place?"

"What are you talking about, Tatsuya, it fits you quite well. You look like a boss."

"So I'm the mafia now."

The one who interjected with this comment — in earnest or jest, that was unknown — happened to be the jacket-clad Leo.

The three who joined them at the shrine were Mizuki, Honoka, and Leo. Erika and Mikihiko were unable to spare themselves due to the high number of disciples at their respective families, and Shizuku was about to study abroad and was unable to attend due to her father's business.

"Although you don't look like the mafia, it's definitely a rare sight to see a high school student wear a haori hakama so well."

"Rather than being from the mafia, you look more like a police chief."

Just as the slightly tardy Haruka and Yakumo said, today Tatsuya wore the traditional Japanese hakama and bamboo clogs. Much like what Honoka and Leo said afterward, he really did look the part. The only thing missing was a pair of swords and a police baton.

"Ho, Haruka-chan. Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year, Ono-sensei. ...Tatsuya-san, and this is?"

Immediately on the heels of Leo's well wishes, Honoka also followed up with her customary greeting towards a teacher as she kept one eye on Yakumo and the other eye carefully watching Tatsuya.

Upon hearing Tatsuya's introduction, both Honoka and Mizuki widened their eyes in shock. Honoka was aware of Yakumo's name, but even Tatsuya was amazed to learn that Mizuki had heard of Yakumo as well.

"I see, so that's why we're at the shrine."

Tatsuya was amazed by Leo's display of hitherto unknown depths, but this was in no way meant to be derogatory towards Leo.

"So?"

Given that Haruka was unaware of the link, this definitely wasn't common knowledge.

"Hm? When it comes to Buddhist monks, wouldn't they be monks from the Tiantai school of Buddhism? The Sanno faith and inner sect is practically inseparable."

Hearing Tatsuya's simplistic explanation that was phrased as a question for some reason, the number of question marks floating around Haruka's head only increased.

"I say, you're quite knowledgeable despite your youth. I believe you are Saijou Leonhart-kun?"

Ignoring the completely confused Haruka, Yakumo happily struck up a conversation with Leo.

"Eh? Do you know me?"

Faced with someone he met for the first time, Leo responded in a rather serious tone.

"That's because I watched the recordings for the Nine Schools Competition."

Yet, Yakumo's response was also a perfectly serious, uninhibited response, but that only caused Leo to furrow his brows on reflex. This was probably because the image of him wearing a cloak and hood that belonged in a different age and location was likely a memory that would stay with him no matter how badly he wanted to forget it.

After the mutual introductions were finished, the five students and the bald man (in a normal male kimono and not the kasaya) and the young woman walked towards the shrine together. —Fortunately, no one inquired the reason why Haruka came along.

The scenery lining the path had remained unchanged over the past 100 years. However, this scenery was only possible after the world food crisis had passed. This was a scene that moved anyone of advanced age who lived through that time, but Tatsuya and company had nothing to be emotional about.

Without any curved paths, up on a long flight of stairs, past the threshold, they arrived in the courtyard of the shrine. There, Tatsuya abruptly noticed a pair of eyes gazing this way.

This was not an impolite gaze stalking them, but a pair of peeping eyes that occasionally glanced this way.

"Shiba-kun, is something up?"

"No."

"I gather the foreigners are rather curious about Tatsuya's wardrobe."

Despite the disguise, there was no way to escape Yakumo's eyes. Even Tatsuya discovered the source without using Elemental Sight and, excluding Haruka for the moment, it was guaranteed that Yakumo would notice.

The "foreigner" Yakumo spoke of was a model young woman with blonde hair and blue eyes. Still, in this day and age, just this alone might be insufficient to determine foreign ancestry. Nevertheless, that young woman's features gave a hint of Japanese descent.

Her age was roughly the same as Tatsuya. After taking into account the differences between white and Asian peoples, the differential would be slight, Tatsuya thought.

"Onii-sama, what are you looking at?"

While Tatsuya only observed the young lady for less than a second, this was enough to rouse Miyuki's attention.

Following her brother's gaze, her eyes glinted as an "Oh" passed her lips.

"...What a beautiful child."

Miyuki softly expressed her internal thoughts.

In Miyuki's eyes, that young woman was a gorgeous young lady who fully deserved the description "beautiful".

Her hair and eyes were both brilliant in color. On some level, she had features that rivaled even Miyuki herself.

Regardless, Tatsuya was not observing her for these reasons.

He sent an inquiring look to Yakumo for help — but seeing Yakumo's highly entertained smirk, he was forced to defuse the situation on his own.

Tatsuya held his sister's gaze while replying to her complaint in an even tone.

"There's no way she can hold a candle to you."

"...You say that every time. Don't think you can always coax me with that."

While the literal words might seem like a vibrant counterattack, her embarrassed visage, flushed beet red, undercut any threat behind her words.

"I'm not coaxing you; I truly think that way. Also, that's not the reason why I'm watching her."

"Seriously, Onii-sama."

Miyuki turned her face to one side upon discovering the hidden warning tucked in Tatsuya's words that could not be ignored.

"...Is there something suspicious about her?"

"In terms of suspicious... I suppose her wardrobe is a little suspicious."

Tatsuya replied with a wry tone. Because of this, Miyuki took another look at the young blond woman and finally realized what he was talking about.

She wore a bright tan coat over her pleated skirt along with striped pants and a pair of long boots. In truth, if that were all there was then this would not have been worthy of note. However, the length of her coat was approximately the same as her skirt, which was about 10 cm below the hips, so you could only see the bright patterns on the tip of the pleat skirt.

In addition, she wore tall boots with a thick cushion that was highly elastic as well as practically see through lace leggings. To top off the ensemble, she carried a bag covered in artificial fur along with a soft hat with animal figures embroidered on the side. All in all, this made her stick out like a sore thumb when it came to modern fashion. It was almost as if she wore a combination of fashion designs from the pre-war Spice Girls. With this in mind, it was hardly amazing for Tatsuya to think that she was highly irregular.

Still, Miyuki knew that her brother wasn't truly paying attention to external appearances.

"But, that's not all there is to it."

Miyuki directed an altogether different, and more intent, gaze toward the young girl.

Maybe it was because she noticed that she had been discovered, the young girl started walking as if nothing had happened.

She was headed straight towards Tatsuya's group.

She silently passed next to them before departing down the long flight of stairs.

Still, the profound gaze sent his way as they rubbed shoulders was most definitely not Tatsuya's misconception.

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The infiltration mission assigned to Major Angelina Sirius also included blatant misdirection. Among them, the initial contact with the target also included allowing the target to catch a glimpse of herself, so this was successful. Although she was initially worried that hiding her own presence would prevent her target from discovering her, this apparently was a groundless concern, just as her subordinate had said. Still, being discovered so easily didn't sit very well with her. Ruminating on this, Major Sirius returned and opened the door to the high class condo that served as her quarters for the duration of this mission.

"Welcome back."

Originally, Major Sirius believed that her roommate shouldn't have returned yet. However, contrary to her expectations, a welcoming response came from within the house.

"Silver, you're back."

The Major used her pet name to greet her adult roommate who intentionally met her at the door.

Her roommate was called Silvia Mercury First. Besides her first name Silvia, the rest were all code names, meaning that she ranked first among the Stars planet-class "Mercury". Rank Warrant Officer. Twenty five years of age. She was a highly regarded female CO who attained the title of "First" at an early age. In the beginning, Silvia didn't want to join the military and intended to become a journalist after graduating from college. This time, her outstanding ability in data analysis prompted her selection as Major Sirius's support personnel.

"Silver?"

This talented roommate paid no heed to Sirius's words and just stared blankly at her. Feeling that something was awry, the major called out to her again before Silvia replied back her eyes still glued to the major.

"Lina... What can I say about that getup?"

Lina was the pet name for Major Sirius. Given the requirements of the infiltration mission, it was vital to hide her identity and avoid terms like "High Commander" or "Major", hence she was ordered to use her pet name Lina. Furthermore, Silvia originally possessed an unrestrained personality, so she quickly forgot about the differences in military rank and warmed up to Lina.

Although her word usage did not contain any honorifics when addressing a superior officer, Lina paid no heed whatsoever.

"Ah, you mean my appearance? In order to avoid notice, I spent some time investigating Japanese fashion magazines from the last century. It was really tiring. So, how do I look?"

"...Before I answer the question, may I present another?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Although Silvia was currently rubbing her temple with the appearance of a grievous headache, Lina didn't notice anything off.

"Don't you have a lot of problems walking around in those boots?"

"Indeed, I almost fell over quite a few times. I'm amazed that Japanese girls can walk around in these boots without twisting their ankle."

"Have you seen any girls wearing those kind of boots?"

The original question had now turned into two questions, but again Lina didn't notice.

"Hm? Now that you mention it, I don't think I have."

Silvia's expression shifted from pained to helpless.

"Lina, allow me to put it bluntly. Those boots of yours were out of date a long time ago!"

"Eh~!?"

Lina's eyes widened in shock at Silvia's words. Seeing this reaction, Silvia's frustration finally exploded.

"What do you mean, eh! Not just the boots. The leggings and hat are also out of date. That's the fashion statement from 100 years ago! Also, your wardrobe doesn't fit very well and is completely unlike something a young girl would wear. There's no way you can walk outside without drawing attention."

Lina's facial expression became stiff upon hearing this reprimand, probably because she was aware of this herself. In reality, she did notice that she drew a lot of attention when she left this morning. Still, at the time this occurred, she thought this was only because the populace didn't see foreigners very often.

"No matter how badly you wanted to get the attention of the target... Why the heck are you drawing attention from unimportant people as well?"

As if unable to hold it back any longer, Silvia gave a huge sigh of defeat.

"High Commander!"

The tone was very calm and steady, but Lina felt a cold bead of sweat trickle down her back.

"Today, the rest of your itinerary is canceled. Allow me, Mercury, to personally give you a simple and easy to understand explanation on the most up to date Japanese fashion."

Silvia made this declaration with both hands on her hips. While Lina vastly outranked Silvia in combat prowess, for some reason she couldn't muster a single counter argument.

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After the brief but densely packed winter vacation, the third semester began.

"Densely packed" included taking Shizuku to the airport, where an unexpected "tearful departure" (starring: Honoka and Shizuku, co-starring: Miyuki and Mizuki) forced them into a corner (this wasn't something that could be solved with brute force), which served as a valuable life

experience, but Tatsuya firmly believed that all this would eventually become nothing more than a "wonderful memory". —At least, it would be too depressing if he didn't tell himself that.

Supposedly, the new transfer student taking Shizuku's place in Class A would be arriving today, but Tatsuya felt this matter didn't relate to him. This person was going to be Miyuki's new classmate, so it's not like it was wholly unrelated, but there were enough degrees of separation that he didn't need to voluntarily greet them.

Speaking of classes, starting on the first day of the third semester, the course schedule would last the entire day. While rumors of the mysterious transfer student in Class A would leak out the moment first period ended, Tatsuya didn't proactively seek them out and paid little attention to the rumors that drifted in one ear and out the other.

Nevertheless, his aloof attitude was decisively among the minority. During the break time after second period, even he was dragged into the rumor mill thanks to his overly curious friends.

"I hear it's an incredibly beautiful young lady."

Seeing the highly excited, or perhaps anticipatory look on Erika as she struck up a conversation finally caused Tatsuya to capitulate.

"She's got a head of luminous blond hair; even the upperclassmen are going to look."

"Erika didn't go catch a glimpse?"

At any rate, the basis for such a lively conversation was nothing more than rumors, which was somewhat of a concern for Tatsuya, prompting his interjection.

"There's a crowd of people there, so there's no way to get in."

"I know exactly where you are most concerned about."

The moment Leo jumped into the conversation, he already preemptively covered his head with one hand.

A second later, Leo was warbling like a frog that was off tune as he keeled over to the floor while clutching his throat.

(If you knew that was going to happen, then keep any unnecessary thoughts to yourself.)

Tatsuya stared in amazement at Leo, who had been rendered unconscious by the sudden jab to the throat by a rolled up notebook, while the person responsible, Erika, continued on as if nothing had happened.

"I am a girl after all~. No matter how pretty that girl is, I sure don't want to squeeze through that crowd."

While Tatsuya supported the idea of not venturing forth specifically to get a look, her perspective that lumped curiosity and lust into one category would draw outrage from any male present.

"That's because this is a magic high school with no precedent for transfer students. Everyone would naturally be curious about students from abroad. After all, this hasn't occurred in the past 10 years."

"I'm not very clear on what happened in the past, but we're not the only one who received transfer students."

The one who interrupted was Mikihiko, who came fresh from the Geometry Preparation Room.

"Second High, Third High, and Fourth High all received short term transfer students. The universities also received people who came in the name of research. I heard this from the family disciples."

"Ah, I also heard about the university. With the incredible edge Flying-Type Magic lent to the military in the Yokohama incident, there are rumors that they are frantically trying to get more information from us."

Ancient Magic and modern magic belonged in separate fields. The Yoshida and Chiba Families both boasted high numbers of disciples, so naturally their level of information was superior to the norm. Apparently, the USNA had invested a surprisingly high amount of personnel. When coupled with the information regarding independent Stars movement he received in November, the situation looked to be grave indeed, Tatsuya thought.

"So the transfer student in Class A is a spy?"

"You moron..."

At the completely uninhibited question from the newly revived Leo, not just Erika, but even Mizuki and Mikihiko looked overcome.

"Leo-kun, you can think about those things, but don't say that aloud..."

"As students, we have to at least maintain a cordial relationship..."

Despite suffering a double whammy from both Mizuki and Mikihiko, Leo still soldiered onward.

"Why would we need to do that, she's in Class A, isn't she? There's no connection, right?"

"You idiot, Miyuki is in Class A. That's the transfer student you see once in a blue moon along with the Student Council Vice President. Until the transfer student has fully acclimated to the school, Miyuki will at least have to watch over her for appearance's sake. So long as this affects Miyuki, there's no way we can remain unrelated."

Erika immediately overruled Leo's rebuttal.

Unwilling to draw more trouble, Tatsuya inwardly sighed "What she said".

That "relationship" materialized faster than expected.

Nay, more like among the myriad possibilities, the earliest opportunity mercilessly manifested itself.

In the student cafeteria, the late arrivals were Miyuki, Honoka, and the young girl with blond hair and blue eyes. Upon seeing the young girl, although Tatsuya was not overly amazed, he still felt a little surprised.

The hair and eye color he had already heard about along with the rumors of great beauty. And if her beauty was all there was to it, then Tatsuya's nerves had already been honed by Miyuki. The source of his surprise was not this, but that this was the same girl he saw at the shrine — or more appropriately, the young girl he noticed at the shrine.

"Excuse me, may I sit with you?"

The young girl spoke fluent Japanese. Her heavy accent couldn't be helped, as expected of a transfer student studying abroad in Japan — or an infiltrator disguised as a transfer student.

"Of course, please go ahead."

Her gaze swept over Tatsuya. Still, there was no need to put on any airs, so Tatsuya quickly acquiesced.

"Lina, let's go get a tray first."

"Tray... Ah, you mean edibles. Understood."

Tatsuya's group had already obtained their food.

Under Miyuki's urging, the three of them walked towards the cafeteria counter.

And because of this, the ruckus surrounding the counter was greater than usual.

Overawed by that formation, the other students seemed to scamper out of the way faster than usual as well.

"Those two together are certainly a force to be reckoned with~"

As a beautiful girl in her own right, but certainly not commanding such presence, Erika couldn't help but sigh in appreciation.

"They look like they're getting along quite well..."

Didn't they meet for the first time today, that was probably what Mizuki really wanted to say.

"Hey, Tatsuya... I think I've seen her somewhere."

"Wow, old school, much?"

As soon as Leo opened his mouth to speak, Erika immediately broke in. Although she knew Leo was saying this because of the young girl's features, Erika still interposed because Leo's phrasing was too direct.

"...Now that you mention it, indeed."

"Eh, Shibata-san as well? Unless she's an artist or model... But that's rather unlikely, right?"

As apparent from Mizuki's supporting comment, Mikihiko's words were pure speculation.

Of course, Tatsuya knew exactly what the truth of the matter was. Rather, the inability to recall such a conspicuously dressed young lady was even more astonishing. Just as Tatsuya hesitated whether to dispel his friends' bewilderment, the topic of their conversation had already returned with Miyuki.

Tatsuya felt a massive amount of eyes turned this way. While pretending to go about their business yet unable to contain their curiosity, gazes were resting on them from all four directions. Though Miyuki still drew the usual amount of stares, the number of surreptitious looks had increased substantially compared to usual.

"Sorry for the wait, Onii-sama."

As if wholly ignorant of these details, Miyuki sat next to Tatsuya as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

"Tatsuya-kun, allow me to make a few introductions."

Naturally, Honoka sat directly across from Tatsuya and spoke towards the young girl by her side.

"Angelina Kudou Shields. You might have heard about this already, but she is the transfer student that will be joining us in Class A starting today."

Hearing Honoka's introduction, not only Tatsuya, but the other three also revealed bemused expressions.

"Honoka, don't just face me; shouldn't you introduce everyone else?"

As the person in question, the transfer student espoused everyone's sentiments.

"Eh, ah, s-sorry!"

"...Well, that's our Honoka."

"Indeed, that's quite like Honoka."

Faced with Erika and Mizuki's commentary, which were more like barbs landing right on target, Honoka flushed red and was unable to speak a single word.

"Then, allow me to make introductions. This is Angelina Kudou Shields from America."

After Miyuki made the second round of introductions, the transfer student's hair swayed slightly as she bowed slightly in her seat.

"Please call me Lina."

As she said this, her eyes slightly squinted as she revealed a dazzling smile.

Her blue pupils, not the color of water or ice, but reminding people of the sapphire of the sky — azure.

The two wavy tresses on the sides of her head were secured by ribbons and, if released, would likely trail to waist length. They might be even longer than Miyuki's hair.

For a high school freshman, such a mature gaze didn't go very well with that childish hair style, but this perfectly coincided with that perfect blend of shock and beauty, with a degree of familiarity to go along with it.

Looks like the majority of the stares were definitely because of her. Upon hearing Miyuki's second introduction, Tatsuya led the way with the introductions in place of his friends who were a little overcome by that dazzling smile (especially the 2 boys) and wore an "Oh?" expression of shock.

"Class E, Shiba Tatsuya. In order to differentiate from Miyuki, please call me 'Tatsuya'."

"Thank you. And please call me Lina. Also, I would greatly appreciate it if you don't use honorifics."

"I understand, Lina."

"Nice to meet you, Tatsuya."

Likely out of habit, Lina extended her hand across the table, which Tatsuya lightly grasped from beneath.

This was just a handshake, and not something ridiculous like a lady extending her hand for a kiss.

"Is Tatsuya by any chance Miyuki's brother?"

Her azure eyes betrayed a hint of wavering, but Lina pretended nothing had happened and pressed on.

She doesn't seem to be able to hide her expressions, Tatsuya thought as he paid heed not to accidentally laugh and just smiled and nodded his head. —Just now, Miyuki clearly referred to Tatsuya as "Onii-sama", which clearly hinted at their relationship.

"I am Chiba Erika. Please call me Erika, Lina."

One of Erika's strong points was not cowering during these situations.

"My name is Shibata Mizuki. Please call me Mizuki."

"Saijou Leonhart, but Leo is fine. I'm a little rough and speak like this, so please don't take offense."

His tone was coarser than usual, but not enough to notice.

"Yoshida Mikihiko, please refer to me as Mikihiko."

Buoyed by her courage, Mizuki, Leo, and Mikihiko all presented themselves.

"Erika, Mizuki, Leo, Mikihiko. Nice to meet you."

Without asking anyone to repeat themselves, Lina remembered all their names on the first try. This was only the beginning, but she succeeded in attaining a favorable impression at this first crucial step.

However, upon hearing Mikihiko pronounce his name as "Mikhiko", this purely Japanese name seemed to have stumped her as an American.

"It's a little hard to pronounce, so if you can't say Mikihiko, go ahead and use Miki."

If the person in question had given permission, then everything should be fine. Yet, coming from someone else, and especially out of Erika's mouth, there was no sense of cordiality. At least, that was how Mikihiko felt as he prepared to reject Erika's proposal.

"Ah, is that so? Then allow me to do so. Miki, is that OK?"

Nonetheless, when that charming smile stole his thunder with "is that OK", Mikihiko could only capitulate.

Lina, who intentionally selected buckwheat from the menu, was busy dueling her chopsticks while trying to contain her frustration and answer the occasional question. Of course, everyone was very courteous and didn't ask any impolite questions. Just as everyone was about to finish eating, Lina finally appeared to master her chopsticks. Seeing this, the questions bubbling up from the Class E members were finally voiced by their representative, Tatsuya.

"Speaking of which, is Lina a blood relative to Elder Kudou?"

The typical term among Japanese Magicians was "sensei", but Tatsuya personally did not prefer this title. Instead, he used the general catch-all term "elder", which was an honored title for retired officers when phrasing the question to Lina.

"I remember that the elder's younger brother went to America and started a family there."

That was an age when Magicians were encouraged to marry across international boundaries. At the time, the news that the younger brother of Kudou Retsu, the "wiliest" among the world's Magicians, had headed for America and started a family with an American Magician was a topic of heated debate.

"Ara, I'm amazed you heard about that, Tatsuya. That's definitely news from a long time ago."

Tatsuya's conjecture appeared to be right on the money.

Additionally, for an American Magician, saying that Kudou Retsu's younger brother went to America "a long time ago" made sense.

"My mother's grandfather is Shogun Kudou's younger brother."

She used the word "Shogun" for General. Tatsuya didn't hear her incorrectly.

That was the term the Magicians from Europe and America used when referring to Kudou Retsu, who spent many years in a leadership position among the Japanese Magicians. Even if she had a quarter of the ancestry, no matter how fluently she spoke Japanese, she was still an American Magician through and through.

"Thanks to that, I am able to come here to study abroad."

"So Lina didn't come here out of her own volition?"

Erika inadvertently asked.

The nervousness and anxiety that Lina revealed didn't appear to be Tatsuya's misconception either.

Chapter 3

Those that prowl in the dark of night are not restricted to those from sinister backgrounds.

That citizens could move about freely without the threat of hoodlums — and completely free at that, was thanks to the tireless efforts on part of the "apostles of order". Tonight, a young man who was (supposedly) one of these pillars of order was grousing to his male companion.

"Seriously, one trouble after another....."

"....."

"Hasn't our crappy luck from last year already come to a close?"

"....."

"Something must have happened. This way, it's really easy to tell if they're illegal aliens or foreign invaders."

".....Investigating them is our job. We're employed because of this rash of incidents, so quit your yapping!"

At the same time as he used his clear and capable voice to advise his superior, who was still softly muttering "Things like this shouldn't be happening at all.....", he also sucked in a breath.

"Yes, this is Inagaki."

Hearing a short burst from his ear set, Inagaki immediately replied back in a terse tone.

".....Acknowledged. We'll be at the scene shortly."

After turning off the transmission device, Inagaki swept a severe gaze over his superior, who wore a languid look on his face as he surveyed his surroundings.

"Inspector, 5 bodies. Cause of death is the same as the ones from before. Just as before, there are no external injuries."

Hearing Sergeant Inagaki's report, Inspector Chiba Toshikazu sighed as his eyes drifted to the skies.

"And all their blood must also be gone. .....Seriously, 5 weird corpses every month. There should be a limit to trying to draw media attention."

Without alluding to the victims or murderer, Inspector Chiba Toshikazu was only sighing to elucidate how troublesome this all was. Still, amid the inconvenienced expression on his face, his pupils flashed with the razor sharp gaze of a hunter.

◊ ◊ ◊

Angelina Shields was currently putting on a performance worthy of being called an exhilarating entrance.

On the first day of her transfer, her appearance alone was such that no one on campus was unaware of her.

Before this, the throne of the most beautiful girl in school belonged solely to Miyuki. This was the combined consensus of the upperclassmen and female student body as well.

However, with the addition of Lina, the title of "Queen" had morphed into "Twin Beauties". Add in the fact that the two of them often moved together, this only served to deepen the impression that "her beauty rivaled that of Miyuki".

The blonde hair that shone luminously beneath the sun and the azure pupils that put even sapphires to shame.

The dark tresses deeper than the night itself and the brilliant eyes that surpassed the luminescence of black pearls.

Miyuki and Lina, equal in beauty, yet diametrically opposed in appearance. Light fairly shone from the school campus that housed the both of them.

Just having that level of beauty was enough to send tongues wagging—

"Miyuki, I'm starting."

"Feel free to begin whenever, I will leave the countdown to you, Lina."

The two of them stood facing each other across a distance of 30 meters.

Between them, a small metal ball with a diameter of 30 cm was placed on a thin rod.

Although there were many similar instruments in the Practical Skills Room, all of their peers abandoned what they were doing and concentrated all their attention on Miyuki and Lina.

No, not just their peers. In the observation stands on the second floor, there were quite a few Year 3 students who possessed the freedom to select their course schedule.

Mayumi and Mari were included among them.

".....Magic Power that can rival Miyuki, do you think that's possible?"

"On some level, she's the American representative to Japan, so this isn't impossible. Nonetheless, it's still hard to believe that someone in the same age bracket as Miyuki can stand up to her Magic Power."

"I agree. Well, seeing is believing. I'll only believe it when I see it with my own eyes."

"We are here precisely to verify the truth of the matter."

The goal of the practical exercise was for both sides to activate their CADs simultaneously, with the winner seizing control of the metal ball in the middle. Not only was this practical exercise easy to manipulate, there was a high competitive feel to it as well.

Precisely because of its simplicity, this was a simple way to determine the difference in power between the two sides.

Since starting this exercise last month, Miyuki had already reached a level that her peers could not hope to reach. The difference between her and the rest of her peers was so great that the instructors had deemed that continued practice against other students had already become meaningless.

It was an open secret that not even the newly returned Student Council members (and Public Moral Committee members) who came to challenge Miyuki upon catching wind of this were her match.

Yet, this Miyuki was about to pit her might against a transfer student.

Given that the upperclassmen completely lost face despite wholeheartedly accepting the outcome (of course, Miyuki wasn't the type to aggrandize her accomplishment and was rather embarrassed over the whole ordeal), Mayumi and Mari had to attend this exercise.

"Three, two, one....."

The moment Lina called out "one", both of them put their hands on the dash board.

"Go!"

The last signal erupted from both of them.

Miyuki tapped the board with her fingertips, while Lina pressed her whole hand onto the board.

Stillness and action, their true colors were reflected in their opening motions. However, this only reflected the physical side of things.

Dazzling arrays of psions were combining and exploding on the Eidos of the metal ball that served as the target. Since it was a light that could not be seen by the naked eye, closing one's eyes served no purpose.

Some of the observers who had not mastered the suppression magic interference techniques pressed their temples and couldn't stop shaking their heads.

The light faded after a brief moment as the metal ball slowly rolled towards Lina's direction.

"Ah, I lost again."

"Fufu, I'm ahead by two rounds now, Lina."

Lina loudly proclaimed her unwillingness to accept defeat while Miyuki smiled slightly while secretly heaving a sigh of relief.

Based on their reactions, it was blatantly obvious that the victor of this contest (not that this was a real contest) was Miyuki. Despite saying "ahead by two rounds", this phrase that was normally reserved for the victor didn't leave an indelible impression of an overwhelming victory, more like—

"......They're truly neck to neck."

"In terms of Activation Speed, the transfer student is actually faster, isn't she?"

"Hm, but Miyuki wins in interference strength, so she seized control before her opponent's magic was finished. Initiative versus power..... Rather than calling this a pure contest of strength, this is more like a tactical victory."

In Mayumi and Mari's eyes, in terms of single systematic processes, the two of them possessed equal Magic Power.

—Afterwards, the same exercise was repeated four times, with both sides splitting the result 2-2, so the day ended with Miyuki still ahead by two rounds.

Noon in the neighboring cafeteria.

Since Lina was sitting with them today, it couldn't be described as their usual arrangement. Since transferring a week ago, she had been tugged this way and that and sat with a different group each time for lunch.

By maximizing her networking possibilities, she could be said to be a model transfer student. In terms of eating with Tatsuya's group, this was actually the first time since the first day of her transfer.

"You're quite popular, Lina."

"Thank you. I'm glad that everyone is so nice."

At Erika's undisguised praise, Lina opted against replying with meaningless, embarrassed humility and came back with an uncaring attitude.

There was no way to tell if this attitude was her personality talking or simply her cultural background, but Tatsuya and company (Erika excluded) found this to be a refreshing change of pace.

"Still, Lina was surprisingly capable. Though I knew that anyone selected to study abroad definitely has the skills to back it up, I seriously can't believe you can match Miyuki to that degree."

"No, I think I should be the one who is surprised."

At Mikihiko's praise, Lina widened her eyes in disbelief.

—Speaking of which, at least when compared to Miyuki, Mikihiko found Lina easier to talk to. When speaking to Miyuki, Mikihiko still spoke formally while he could speak more casually with Lina.

"I used to be undefeated in high level competitions like this, but I can never seem to beat Miyuki, and when against Honoka, I may win in overall skill but I still lose in complexity of design. As expected of the Japan, one of the strongest magical countries."

"Lina, practical exercises are just that and not a competition. I believe there's no point in dwelling on victory or defeat."

"Magic competitions are very important. While these are only practical exercises, I believe specifically choosing highly competitive subjects where victory matters is the only way to improve."

Faced with Miyuki's humble deflection, Lina charged forward with her counter argument, completely unafraid of any potential clash.

This was just the way she was, which was a refreshing change of pace in its own right.

"The will to compete is very important during contests, but surely there's no need to carry that beyond the event itself, right? Practical exercises are ultimately only practice and are fundamentally different than practical skills examinations that determine personal skill."

"......True. Maybe Tatsuya is right. I might have been a little too excited."

"Excitement isn't a bad thing. Miyuki has also become more motivated with a new opponent taking the field, so on that point, I should thank you, Lina."

Lina was frankly nodding her head in assent to Tatsuya's words in the beginning, but now she turned an incredulous expression towards him.

"It appeared! Tatsuya-kun's sis-con commentary!"

To one side, Erika gave off an "Ah ha" comment while pretending to sigh.

"Ah..... Oh, so that's how it is..... Tatsuya and Miyuki are on very good terms."

Swallowing a more impolite outburst, Tatsuya seemed to feel that the gaze Lina sent his way was rapidly dropping in temperature.

"Speaking of which, Lina, although this isn't really major....."

Detecting the atmosphere heading in a wonky direction, Tatsuya changed the subject.

"What is it?"

She sent a chilling gaze his way, but it was bereft of any condescension, so this was probably an act to parallel Erika's practical joke.

While this was the result he was hoping for based on his observations, there was no guarantee he was correct. Still, this was Tatsuya, and Tatsuya was not so tender that he would shut his mouth and retreat from just this.

"If I recall correctly, isn't 'Angie' the usual nickname for 'Angelina'?"

This was not supposed to be a groundbreaking question.

At least, that was the case for Erika, Mizuki, and Honoka, who were sitting at the table with them.

Yet, for one brief moment, Lina's expression definitely faltered.

"No, you remembered correctly, but the nickname 'Angie' isn't as rare as you think. For comparison, I had a classmate in elementary school called 'Angela' who was referred to as 'Angie'."

"So that's why Lina prefers to be known as 'Lina' and not 'Angie', eh."

Tatsuya nodded his head in comprehension.

He never gave a hint that he discovered how badly Lina faltered just then.

◊ ◊ ◊

First High did not have any student dorms.

Since there were only nine magic high schools in the entire country, it was inevitable that students from abroad would be present.

Thus, while student dorms didn't seem to be entirely out of the question, in this day and age, besides a few specialized boarding schools that viewed student dorms as an integral part of the curriculum, facilities such as student dorms were no longer in service.

In the modern age, HAR (Home Automation Robot) has already entered the mass market, purchase of daily items can be done online and delivered directly to the door, so students can freely live on their own without discomfort, making student dorms a redundant facility. Owing to the above reasons, most of the students who were unable to return to their family homes largely chose to rent housing close to the school. As a transfer student, there was nothing odd in Lina renting an apartment. Her house

was only two bus stops from school, which was considered close proximity thanks to modern public transit. The reason that she did not rent a personal studio or a one room apartment and instead chose a small, family-sized apartment was because Lina wasn't living on her own.

"Welcome back, Lina."

"Silvie, back already?"

The moment Lina opened the door to the apartment, Warrant Officer Silvia, who was serving as her support on this mission, immediately greeted her as if she had been waiting for her arrival for quite some time.

"It's quite late now, isn't it?"

Lina smiled wryly upon hearing this after taking a roundabout way home and walked towards the dining room in her uniform. There was,

"Mina, you're here."

A young woman wearing a tense expression greeted Lina. She was standing in front of the table and had probably just conversed with Silvia.

"Yes, sorry for bothering you, Major."

The woman called Mina replied back in a stiff tone. With a perplexed smile on her face, Lina took a seat by the table.

"Please sit, Mina. Silvie, could I trouble you for some tea?"

Normally, Silvia would completely ignore the chain of command and fire back with "Given that you're a girl, you should fix your own tea". However, she wasn't someone who couldn't read the atmosphere.

"Is milk tea OK? Mina, would you like a cup?"

"Ah, OK, sorry for the trouble."

Silvia's question seemed to terrify Mina, but at least she loosened up a few degrees as she replied back.

The woman's full name was Michaela Honda, or Mina for short. She shared Lina's Japanese-American heritage, but unlike Lina, Mina could fully blend in based on her appearance. Perhaps her skin tone was a little darker? This degree was not enough to raise eyebrows in Japan.

She was one of the spies who had entered Japan ahead of Lina's group. That being said, this wasn't her original occupation either. Her true identity was a magic researcher attached to the Department of Defense who specialized in Release-Systematic Magic. She was a talented woman who participated in last November's black hole experiment in Dallas. She volunteered for this mission in search of an alternate breakthrough for "annihilation reaction energy conversion" after the debacle at the Dallas Research Center.

Like many magic researchers, she was also a Magician. Unlike the fake students who came this month under the guise of mutual research, she had infiltrated the magic universities under the identity of a salesperson and engineer from the Japanese branch of Maximilian Industries, "Mia Honda". Speaking of which, her current housing was directly next door to Lina's rented apartment. Despite not being combat or intelligence personnel, she still served as support and was concealed enough to serve as an active asset for this infiltration mission.

"Do you have any clues?"

Lina's initial question was posed for Silvia, who had just sat down after setting down the cups.

"I've gone over the publicized information, but so far I haven't found any new data."

"I see, looks like there's no way to get results quickly from that direction."

This time she turned towards Michaela.

"How about your side, Mina?"

"Nothing here either..... Sorry."

Michaela had somewhat relaxed a little before curling up again out of anxiety.

It wasn't Lina's intent to make everyone so high strung like she was a strict person. However, ever since the end of last year, Michaela had always been extremely nervous around Lina since day one. Rather than saying (because) there was a divide between researchers and combat personnel, the more likely cause (reason) was because Lina stood at the pinnacle of USNA Magicians as "Sirius" despite her youth. Simply telling her to relax

wasn't going to achieve anything. Even though it had already been two weeks since that day and they were now able to have some degree of interaction, this was only restricted to everyday conversation. In the short term, Lina herself knew that it was impossible to achieve the same degree of an easy working relationship she had with Silvia.

"How's your side Lina, did you get closer to the target?"

Hearing Silvia's question, Lina's expression seemed to be enveloped in fog.

"I feel that I haven't gotten closer at all."

Lina sighed and wore a bitter smile on her face.

"I haven't gotten a single piece of critical information and it seems like they've already seen through my disguise."

"......What are you talking about?"

"Tatsuya asked me 'isn't Angie usually short for Angelina' and almost scared me half to death."

"Couldn't that be a coincidence?"

"I have no idea. I'm such a failure. So I guess I'm really not cut out for this (type of work), eh?"

Lina kept sighing deeply. Silvia filled her cup with milk tea again. Noticing that Silvia and Michaela were sending worried looks her way, Lina managed to find her second wind.

"Don't worry about it, my opponent is only a high school student after all. He shouldn't able to discern my identity as Sirius. Even if he suspects something, there's no way he'll stumble onto something concrete."

It didn't take a genius to tell that these brave words were only empty talk. In the beginning, Lina had already been tasked with identifying their target under any circumstances, so saying "not getting identified" was just empty talk. Silvia was well aware of this, but decided to abstain after considering that this would damage morale too badly. In addition, nor could she say that their opponent was no ordinary high school student.

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After handing a robe to his sister, who just rose from the bed of the psion wave examination device in nothing but her underclothes, Tatsuya watched the examination results while his customary, machine-like poker face contained slight traces of concern that could not escape Miyuki's eyes.

"......Are you troubled by something? Onii-sama, please feel free to tell me anything. No matter what Onii-sama needs to say, I am always willing to listen."

Rather than calling this an overreaction, this was more like overly motivated.

As this thought ran across Tatsuya's mind, he was mystified as to how to respond and what expression to greet this with, and in the end only adopted a dry chuckle.

"No, rather than saying what troubles me, I think this time it's my own problem. Since the upper ceiling of the scale of magic design exceeded original expectations, the processing power of the CAD can no longer keep up with your Magic Power. I was planning on setting a larger magic calculation area inside..... You're over thinking this."

"I apologize."

"What are you apologizing for? I should be the one praising you."

Gently caressing his sister's hair as she kept her head bowed, Tatsuya smiled warmly at Miyuki when she raised her head.

Miyuki followed her brother's lead, more like mirrored her brother's smile. Everything was fine up until this point—

(.....This is not the time to start blushing.)

Cognizant of the inherent danger — largely presented by the cleavage peeking through the gaps in the robe — Tatsuya quickly picked up the conversation.

"Looks like Lina transferring into the same class became an excellent stimulus."

Upon hearing Lina's name, the brilliant blush across Miyuki's face immediately faded.

"Indeed..... This may sound a little arrogant, but I've yet to meet an opponent of her caliber before."

This was not because the mood had been ruined. Miyuki wasn't the sort of woman who would be upset that another woman's name came from Tatsuya's lips. Her expression contained a visible degree of transparency for another reason altogether. A quiet, burning fighting spirit lurked in Miyuki's eyes.

"Oh yes, Onii-sama, your question earlier this morning was indeed?"

"You noticed?"

Tatsuya chuckled lightly as he said this.

"As I suspected, Lina is 'Sirius'."

Tatsuya declared this as his smile was replaced by a sharp expression.

"As surmised, there's no way to hide these things from Miyuki."

Seeing Tatsuya laugh once more and raise his arms to stretch, Miyuki couldn't keep a straight face any longer and smiled mischievously while raising a finger towards Tatsuya.

"Of course, because Miyuki watches Onii-sama more closely than anyone else."

Tatsuya intentionally laughed aloud. There was no way to tell whether he felt that Miyuki was joking or he was simply trying to regard it as a joke.

Seeing her brother laugh, the only thing on Miyuki's mind was how badly she really wanted to know what Tatsuya was truly thinking about.

Rather because the basement (more like underground facility) air conditioning was still running, it was more like a flimsy robe covering her undergarments was the true reason why neither one of them could relax.

Miyuki needed to return to her room and change, so the two of them returned to the house.

What covered Miyuki's slim and exquisite legs were not a pair of black leggings or tights, but black stockings. The clothing around her upper body was rather loose and there was a hint of Miyuki's pale flesh between the mini-skirt and stockings.

This was all well and good while standing, but the moment Miyuki sat down, he immediately noticed that, wasn't this a terrible situation? — And exactly why was this terrible, Tatsuya calculated.

Unaware of her brother's feelings — not that he had any way of telling — Miyuki placed the coffee mug in front of her brother.

Except today, she sat across from Tatsuya rather than on the sofa next to him.

She did not adopt a lotus-like posture and place her legs atop one another.

Rather, she placed her knees together and kept them slanted diagonally.

This was a very amorous posture which hinted at the secret charms beneath her skirt.

Uncertain of Miyuki's intention (the superficial intent was obvious, but the true meaning remained elusive), Tatsuya elected against focusing on that.

After making that decision, Tatsuya's gaze ceased wavering.

Across the table, he could detect a trace of displeasure from Miyuki, but he chose not to call her on it and began to speak while watching Miyuki.

"Continuing our earlier conversation, I believe there is a high possibility that Lina is 'Angie Sirius'."

Last month, Tatsuya had received a warning from his aunt Yotsuba Maya that the USNA's Army Magician unit Stars had begun investigating the Magician responsible for the Strategic-Class Magic "Material Burst". At the time, Maya had made it very clear that Tatsuya and Miyuki were likely to be included among the possible suspects.

Tatsuya believed that Lina coming to First High was likely one aspect of the ongoing intelligence war.

"Currently, the problem is that we have uncovered Sirius's identity despite our opponent's efforts to conceal her identity. In addition, we can also see that they are trying to unravel our true identities."

It was only natural that Tatsuya was confused, given the inexplicably weak personal and mental defenses around Lina, at least by USNA standards. The reason behind this remained beyond Tatsuya's grasp at the moment.

"Furthermore—"

Maybe he would burst into laughter upon learning the truth, but right now Tatsuya wore a serious expression as he continued his analysis.

"Why would USNA send Sirius, who is practically their trump card, over here?"

Miyuki had long since switched gears and was following Tatsuya's example by adopting a serious tone of her own.

"Just so. Based on the observations in the past week, I feel that Lina's strengths do not lie in intelligence work. I fear that her real mission may lie elsewhere and her disguise is meant for that."

"'Sirius' simply covers too many angles....."

"Assuming Lina is Sirius..... Her infiltration mission may just be a cover. Her real target may lie somewhere else."

"To force the USNA to invest Sirius into an international mission..... What could it be?"

They might be dwelling on this too much, but fortunately the two of them were still in the dark.

"I have no idea..... However, I think right now we don't have to focus on that."

From an omniscient perspective, Tatsuya's speculation had already drifted off subject as his tone suddenly lost its earlier intensity.

"We are very fortunate that America has provided you with an excellent opponent, Miyuki."

Nonetheless, his earnest tone did not disappear.

"Indeed, Onii-sama."

At her brother's sincere tone and gaze, Miyuki changed her tone.

"Compete against Lina with all your might. We were just talking about it this morning, but we should care about victory or defeat. That will push you to a higher plane than ever before."

"Yes."

"Mutual competition as the fuel for growth applies towards Lina as well, but right now you don't have to worry about that. This is a rare opportunity."

Hearing Tatsuya's powerful words, Miyuki revealed a serene smile without a trace of unease.

"That's true. Also, Miyuki has Onii-sama with her. So long as Onii-sama is by my side, I will fear no foe, even if they be Sirius herself."

Tatsuya's words spoke of a rival and not an opponent.

There was a slight feeling from Miyuki's words that she was a little off topic.

However, in the face of Miyuki's limitless faith, Tatsuya nodded his head without any hesitation.

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There were quite a few alterations in Tatsuya's extracurricular activities. On paper there were only two, staying in the library or patrolling the grounds as a member of the Public Moral Committee, but the latter presented many interruptions.

Enough to give one pause and consider if someone was conspiring something.

Today, this feeling was particularly prominent.

While Public Moral Committee members were bestowed with the right to carry CADs on campus, Tatsuya typically didn't use one while executing his duties to the committee.

Originally, CADs were tools that shortened the time needed to activate the Four Systematic Magics. It was only of limited use to other magic, such as Outer-Systematic Magic, Non-Systematic Magic, Ancient Magic, and especially if Non-Systematic Magic was only releasing psions to the point that the lack of a CAD would not seem unnatural at all.

After accidentally revealing his ability to use Gram Demolition during the Nine Schools Competition, Tatsuya restricted himself to Non-Systematic Magic outside of class since the start of the second semester. This was more than enough to handle any trouble, so there was no need to carry a CAD.

The reason he carried the committee's CAD while on patrol was because of its demonstrative power. Although they did not possess great power as a deterrent, Tatsuya customarily returned to HQ before his patrol and put on CADs on his two wrists.

As was usual, Tatsuya headed for the committee HQ after class today and saw Lina's figure. Even from afar, that blaze of golden hair was unmistakable.

Suppressing the urge to flee based on premonitions of trouble, Tatsuya worked hard to keep his voice level.

"Good morning."

He had long become accustomed to the committee members' greetings that paid no heed to the time of day. He walked past the crowd — which was actually no more than 5 people, and deftly finished the preparations on his hands.

"Ah, Shiba-kun, perfect."

Unfortunately, Tatsuya was nabbed by Kanon.

His ability to hide his disappointment was the product of his daily training(?).

"What is it?"

Tatsuya's voice did not betray any subjective or objective warmth. It was both a strong and weak point for Kanon that she paid no attention to details such as this.

"This is Shields-san. I believe you already know her?"

It wasn't much of a question. Of course, Tatsuya's only option was to nod.

"Shields-san wishes to observe the Public Moral Committee's daily activities. I believe she wanted to see how Japanese magic high schools govern themselves. Shiba-kun is on duty today, so would you be able to bring her along?"

How troublesome, Tatsuya thought. He was unclear on Lina's intentions, but he felt this definitely raised the probability of troublesome events happening. This was a guarantee, since he was sure they would run into male students (all the upperclassmen) enamored with Lina, watching him with sharp gazes. Even if he was spared the jealous glares within the committee, he didn't dare imagine how incredibly irritating it would be to walk around campus with Lina in tow. Alas, both Lina's request and Tatsuya's appointment were perfectly logical turns of events.

"Understood."

Tatsuya had no options but to offer an immediate and unconditional surrender.

Lina had recently transferred here so there wasn't much of a surprise, but this was the first time they were walking together alone. Strictly speaking, with all the students milling about, the two of them weren't walking alone on campus, but the uncomfortable atmosphere wasn't likely to change depending on whether other people were present or not.

First of all, in Tatsuya's defense, the uncomfortable atmosphere wasn't because he had an amazing beauty like Lina walking next to him, but because Lina never let up on that inquisitive feeling of hers. Every once in a while, she would secretly sneak a "Hm~~" peek at Tatsuya, and, despite her efforts at trying to conceal these looks, Tatsuya felt that they were only digging her deeper.

Even so, Tatsuya couldn't just directly come back with "You're a spy, aren't you". The pressure just kept building like a volcano ready to burst.

"Did Lina's old school not have this system?"

Tatsuya felt that he couldn't stand this silent drama any longer (technically, they were only a dozen yards from HQ). What sort of heavy silence is this, Tatsuya thought as he indulged in his rarely seen sense of public service and provided the initial question. —Now that he thought about it, that was a terribly malicious question.

"Eh? Uh....."

Malicious, because he could see Lina's anxiety.

Rumor had it that everyone bestowed with the title of "Sirius" was a front line fighter through and through. Surely it wasn't possible that Lina never went through infiltration training, Tatsuya thought, unable to decide if he wanted to laugh or cry.

".....It can't be helped if a Year 1 student doesn't know anything about it."

Feeling somewhat guilty for Lina's distressed state, Tatsuya tried to give her a way out. There was no need to shred her disguise, since putting all the cards on the table would only make things more troublesome.

"Eh..... Ah, just so. That's the reason why I wanted to understand the secret to why a Year 1 student could join in this activity on this campus."

She wasn't really adept at handling curve balls, but she had a good head on her shoulders, Tatsuya thought. She was nimble enough to grab the lifeline that other people threw to her, which might actually put her on a better footing than his own sister.

As he suspected, he was being stabbed left and right by all sorts of gazes. However, probably wary of leaving a negative impression in front of the transfer student, no one actually made a move against him.

As such, Tatsuya led Lina through the primary practical exercise rooms and research labs. This patrol accompanied with explanations gave the impression that he was giving a campus tour.

Lina halted her footsteps at one end of the building that ran alongside the research labs near the staircase that led to the neighboring building.

"Are you tired? Do you want to head back?"

Of course, he knew that this wasn't the real reason she stopped. He was only using this to open the conversation.

"No, I'm fine."

Her tone gave the impression that she wasn't sure where to begin.

"What is it?"

At Tatsuya's urging, Lina finally broke free of her hesitation.

"Tatsuya is a substitute — a Course 2 student, correct?"

"That's true, is there a problem?"

It had been a long time since someone came straight out with that question. Is it this again? Rather than having that feeling, he was rather refreshed by this and replied with a question of his own.

"When I asked Miyuki as to why you wore a different uniform than everyone else in Class A, she told me in a rather annoyed voice."

Lina burst into laughter when she recalled that incident. That certainly sounded like Miyuki's button being pressed, Tatsuya chuckled wryly.

"But, when I asked Kanon earlier, she said that Tatsuya stands in the top tier among Magicians in First High."

When Tatsuya heard Kanon's name pronounced as "cannon", he unilaterally interpreted it as canon rather than cannon — calling Kanon a cannon was a little too insulting.

With so many unnecessary things running through his head, comprehending what Lina was trying to say took more time than usual.

"Tatsuya, why are you pretending to be a poor student? And since you are pretending to be a poor student, why did you so easily reveal your true strength? Tatsuya's behavior is highly irregular so I don't understand why you went about it the way you did."

After listening to Lina's question to the end, he finally understood what Lina really wanted to say.

"I have no idea what you asked Chiyoda-senpai, but it's not like I was pretending to do nothing. I truly am a poor student."

Fortunately, Lina gave a detailed explanation in order to convey her question and didn't just leave Tatsuya hanging, or he really might have embarrassed himself. He really needed to curtail those unnecessary thoughts, Tatsuya thought.

"The practical skills examination is dependent on speed, scale, and strength and is based on international standards. However, victory or defeat in live combat does not depend strictly on those three variables. Originally, physical prowess plays a huge role in live combat. While my practical skills examination labeled me a poor student, I can hold my own in a fight. Simple as that."

That was the indisputable truth. Tatsuya believed this was enough to answer the question, or on some level, deflect the question.

"......I do agree that practical skill scores and combat capability are two different things."

However, Lina's words were not expected and seemed to hint at something more.

"I too was someone who wasn't amazing at school but was a Magician who was useful on the battlefield."

A suspicious aura seemed to slowly emanate from Lina's body.

"Isn't that wonderful?"

The warmth in Tatsuya's eyes vanished.

"I can tell, you're good."

Before that cold, or rather, steely gaze, Lina let out a dazzling smile.

This was not a blossoming flower, but the beauty of a razor sharp blade honed to its finest.

Lina's hand suddenly moved!

Tatsuya swiftly intercepted the striking palm.

The edged right hand that Lina used the smallest possible movement to stab forward with was caught at the wrist by Tatsuya.

The thrusting palm aimed for Tatsuya's chin was intercepted before it could even reach the throat.

Lina shifted the captured right hand into a pistol shape and stabbed forward with her index finger.

A terrifying claw came whistling towards Tatsuya's face.

In a flash, Tatsuya flung Lina's right hand to one side.

Lina frowned as the psion light gathered at the tip of her index finger was dispersed before the blow landed.

"How dangerous."

"I believed that you would dodge it."

"Care to explain this for me?"

"Before that, can you let go of my hand? That stings, and this position is a little embarrassing for me."

In order to fling her hand to one side, the distance between Tatsuya and Lina's bodies had closed quite a bit. From the side, it looked like Tatsuya was attacking Lina — and forcing a kiss.

Tatsuya immediately let go of Lina's hand.

However, his eyes gave no hint of shame or remorse.

"Seriously, that hurt. You even left..... Huh? No trace? Precision strength control?"

Lina wore a perplexed expression as she used her left hand to pull back her right sleeve.

"After striking at the pressure point on another person's face, letting you experience a little pain is the least you deserve."

"That was only a simple psion block that contains no threat whatsoever. The most it could do was give the impression of being struck by a gun."

"I do believe that more than justifies your violent treatment."

Even after seeing such a warm smile, Tatsuya's expression didn't relax in the slightest.

Lina could only sigh and raise both arms.

"I get it, I get it. Please forgive my rudeness, Tatsuya-sama."

Lina reset her attitude and formally bowed to Tatsuya before raising her head.

The once severe expression on Tatsuya's face suddenly curved at the corners of his mouth for some bizarre reason.

".....Is there anything else?"

"No, that is sufficient. I think we can talk normally in the future. Though this refinement doesn't seem like Lina at all."

It appeared that the change in corners of Tatsuya's mouth was because he felt that it didn't suit her.

"In what way am I not refined!"

"Your character."

He wasn't sure whether she would get the meaning of a vague term like "character", but given Lina's fluent Japanese there should be no problem, hence Tatsuya skipped the explanation time.

Then, whether this was a blessing or a curse, she successfully interpreted his words.

"There's no such thing! At the very least, I've been invited to tea with the President!"

Propelled onward, Lina was trying to prove her elegance.

"Oh....."

Hearing this, Tatsuya chuckled lightly.

Amid this laughter, there were hints of chilling frost.

On reflex, Lina covered her mouth.

In Tatsuya's expression, she could see Mephistopheles grinning at her.

"The President, eh....."

There were many in positions of power that could give even Magicians, capable of murder without any weapon, pause. Even in a country like Japan that had very low walls, there were a few special people in power that even Magicians had to take periodical antidotes to defuse the poison in their bodies before meeting them.

In the USNA, the only Magician who could meet the President face to face was probably.....

"I've been had, right.....?"

Unwilling to accept the outcome, Lina glared at Tatsuya, but this debacle was entirely on Lina herself.

"My infamy precedes me. It was pure coincidence that the conversation went the direction it did. In regards to that question, I believe Lina imploded on your own, correct? After all, Lina was the one who instigated this."

And that is what it's like to suffer in silence. The only thing Lina could do was continue to stare at Tatsuya in frustration.

"So, should you explain why you went about doing this?"

".....I just wanted to know how capable Tatsuya is."

"How capable I am? For what?"

Lina's eyes drifted away from Tatsuya as he stood there frowning in suspicion.

"Nothing really..... It was out of pure curiosity."

"Curiosity..... You did all of this just for that."

Easily seeing through this blatant lie, Tatsuya continued to murmur.

Lina sulkily gave a small "Hmph".

".....Strictly speaking, that is true. Actually....."

Muttering softly, Lina dragged her gaze back to Tatsuya.

"I wanted to know if you wanted to come to the USNA."

"Me, to America?"

"In my opinion, you have such a high level of skill yet are relegated to such a lowly position, wouldn't you want to be on a stage that gives you the recognition you deserve. While a Magician's grade is assessed in America much like the international standard, there are still places that aren't like that. America is a free and diverse country. There's no way that you would be relegated to a substitute simply because you're lacking in one area. I believe that Tatsuya will be recognized as befitting your true potential."

"An interesting declaration."

Faced with an unexpected invitation, Tatsuya's attitude softened somewhat.

"In that case....."

Seeing this, Lina immediately charged into the breech.

"If that was the unadulterated truth."

However, Tatsuya's satire immediately took the wind from her sails.

"Lina, where exactly is this unorthodox place that prizes merit above all else? Say, Arlington?"

Arlington used to be a naval academy, but was now one of the primary providers for Magicians and magic researchers in the USNA military.

"......Yes. But, there are other places."

"Lina, assessment based on merit is designed to select the right way to use tools."

Despite the fact that Tatsuya's tone remained mocking, it lacked the chilling cold that deafened the soul.

"In regards to selecting Magicians best suited for the military, Arlington and the JSDF are two sides of the same coin. Although regarding their broad-mindedness, there might be a few differences."

Most of all, it sounded as if Tatsuya was teasing a friend.

"Oh well, forget it."

"Eh......?"

Suddenly Tatsuya murmured in a tone of "it doesn't matter anyways".

Lina was unable to follow this abrupt change in gears and could only reply with a befuddled voice and expression.

"You were just trying to test my skills, right?"

"Uh..... Yes."

"Then let's leave it there. Please refrain from doing such things in the future."

Isn't it about time for you to go? Urging her to do so, Tatsuya's expression was now no different than usual.

Lina could no longer tell the difference from the usual Tatsuya.

"Don't you have anything you want to ask me?"

It was understandable that Tatsuya wanted to pretend that scene never happened. This was also in Lina's best interests. However, she had no idea why Tatsuya would do this, or his intentions.

It was incredibly fortunate that Tatsuya wasn't asking any questions and Lina knew she could be trampling on his kind gesture, but she couldn't resist her own question.

"Ask what?"

"What do you mean? Like..... My real identity or something, don't you want to know?"

"Don't worry about it. There are some stones in the world better left untouched."

Lina wasn't certain if he was being truthful or evasive.

The human being known as Shiba Tatsuya was too incomprehensible for Lina.

".....You, are incredibly irritating."

Tatsuya only shrugged his shoulders and turned around at Lina's blunt accusation.

At the same time that she was following his back, Lina was clairvoyant that the word "irritating" didn't refer to its superficial meaning.

Chapter 4

January 14th, AD 2096, Shibuya 11:00 p.m.

Late at night on a Saturday, though there were no cars on the street, it was filled with young people.

There were no cars in sight due to the changes in both the traffic system and the customary working hours. The self-driving (auto-pilot) individual transportation trams work around the clock. Besides, in a big city like Shibuya, there is no need to employ these vehicles that are meant for communal use, as by using the motorized sidewalks that have been laid out underground, one can reach the train station easily.

Moreover, in the present age, where infrastructure for working from home has been upgraded, there is no longer any need for one to stay back in the office till late at night. In case of urgently needed work, the current trend in businesses is to settle it at home and submit it back to the company via a private line. Modern offices are places for business negotiations, not places for paperwork. In the first place, as long as one is doing an honest business, the need for deliberately scheduling business negotiations at midnight would disappear.

Shibuya at night is the town of young people where adults' figures are not seen.

In fact, one cannot see this kind of scene at this time in any town other than Shibuya.

Shibuya, Shinjuku, Ikebukuro, Roppongi… Before the war, those towns flourished as shopping districts for young people; but now, seeing young people wandering and gathering late at night is a scene that one would only see here in Shibuya.

During the era of chaos which spanned two decades, at different periods, in Shinjuku, Ikebukuro and Roppongi, as a result of the destructive activities caused by the foreigners, together with the extreme devastation caused by the xenophobic activities[1] of the raging native youngsters in response to the foreigners' deeds, emerged widespread vermiculated ruins. Measures for the thorough restoration of public order were taken during the course of reconstruction, and these towns have been rebuilt as fairly dense bustling towns.

But, Shibuya was the exception.

Since before the war, the degree of devastation had deepened and the disputes between youngsters intensified, and thus, as a result of being the first to expel the foreigners, in contrast Shibuya had been spared the absolute total destruction that had befallen the other towns. And as the lawlessness of the nights in Shibuya were left alone consequently even now, one cannot flatly assert that one end result is better than the other.

If this was such a lawless area, be it day or night, the "Redevelopment" initiated by the government, and the local municipality who has become very much intolerant to the absence of order as compared to the pre-war days, would probably have proceeded, as one might guess. The current administrative authorities have become considerably strict regarding the restrictions on private rights related to real estate.

However, Shibuya holds completely different façade during daytime and night.

During the daytime, it is a business center where honest company employees busily come and go.

At night, it is a pleasure quarter where youngsters loiter, with the affectation of outlaws.

As they can't round them up at once, it's difficult for the authorities to take the plunge into redeveloping the city.

And on this very evening as well, at the beginning of the New Year, there were many youngsters gathered on the streets making as much of a racket as they wanted, laughing, flirting, and exchanging blows.

Among them, with finely chiseled features, and a sturdy build, a young man's figure could be seen.

Dressed in a sweatshirt and jumper pulled over it, which was unthinkably light clothing in the deep of winter, Leo was walking with faltering steps in Shibuya in the dead of the night. Although we use the word 'faltering' here, his legs and feet were properly covered in jeans and sneakers. However, judging by the steps he was taking, he seemed to have no specific destination in mind.

Leo had one bad pastime. No, rather than a pastime, it was probably a habit.

The habit of roaming.

Not walking, running, nor shouting, but roaming in the night.

As the dead of the night drew near, he would want to randomly wander about in uncertainty.

Leo thought that this was due to his instincts that have been carved into his body's genes.

He is the third generation of the "Burg Folge (Fortress Series)" that was developed in Germany in the initial days, which put the technique of tuning Magicians via genetic manipulation in practical use for the first time in the world.

The Burg Folge was a body tuning technique developed with an emphasis on improving the durability of the body. In those days, in order to raise close quarters combat ability, thought to be the weaker point of magicians, rather than strengthening magic ability, the Burg Folge, which strengthened the physical abilities contained in genes, brought forth a breed of "Super soldiers that can use magic", or "Enhanced humans that can simultaneously use both superhuman physical abilities, and magic technical abilities", both of which were more apt descriptions than calling them tuned magicians.

Although Chimera-fication measures were not included in the tuning methods, it is not difficult for one to imagine that large sized mammals that are much more tenacious than humans had been used as a reference at the inception of the genetic remodeling method.

Not by removing the body's limiter with external means – it was already known at that time that such a method would have a high probability of damaging an individual's magical technical ability – but by raising the performance of the physical body.

Possibly as a result of that unreasonable genetic remodeling, many among the Burg Folge's first generation died during childhood, and even the majority of those who grew to adulthood went mad and died.

Leo's grandfather was one of the few survivors.

Leo had a fear.

Someone looking at him as a person from the outside would be unable to see it, but he has been living his life while carrying that fear deep down in his heart.

He wondered if he would also go mad one day.

With a non-human factor devouring his human factor, he wondered if he would end up losing his senses.

Since he thought that, by releasing his impulses, whether or not he would be able to delay the moment when his creaking heart broke. He tried to be loyal to his own impulses. He knew from example that his grandfather was able to freely live a natural span of life.

That was why he didn't go against his impulse of "wandering at night".

At the whim of this impulse, underneath the moon, underneath the stars, underneath the jet-black clouds, he was walking aimlessly.

One night in the center of the city, one night in the shopping districts, one night in the suburbs, one night on a secluded mountain. Without destination. On a whim, he chose a road by the mood of the day.

That he came today to Shibuya was merely pure coincidence.

There was a figure of a young man in a dark suit wearing a gray trench coat, which, even though new, had creases here and there.

"Huh? Erika's older brother, Mr. Inspector?"

The person who just passed by was coincidentally an acquaintance. It was only that, but Leo called out to the young man. –Merely at a whim, since one doesn't always call out to an acquaintance upon seeing him each and every time.

The next moment, a wave of noise surged towards him.

Leo's voice was by no means big. It was just enough to call a passing person to stop.

Despite that, gazes one could certainly not call friendly were drawn from both sides of the street.

"You, come with me for a moment."

Responding with a smacked expression was the man who was walking next to "Erika's older brother". Leo also remembered the face of the man, who was at the age by which it has become a little painful to call a young man. He not only remembered the face, but also the name.

"Inagaki-san, right? What is it all of a sudden?"

Without answering the question, which could also be treated as rude, Inagaki grabbed Leo's left wrist.

Although shaking it off would be easy, Leo quietly followed Inagaki.

He was brought to a small bar inside of a back alley. Although "BAR" was written on the signboard, it was a store's appearance that Leo felt did not need the use of western-style characters at all.

"Master, I'll borrow the upstairs."

Inagaki called to the proprietor of the shop, who was polishing a glass on the other side of the counter, and went up the stairs at the far end without waiting for a reply. Leo was brought to a cramped small room which was filled only with four chairs placed around a small round table. The doorway being a bulky, airtight constructed door, looking like the hatch of a spaceship, was awfully mismatched to the worn-out interiors.

"I'm still a minor."

Leo said so in a joking manner, forestalling Inagaki, who was on the verge of talking after rotating the handle with both hands, firmly locking the door.

Next to Inagaki, who looked like he chewed on a sour bug, Chiba Toshikazu pleasantly – not in the sense of having fun, but in the sense of deep interest – laughed.

"Saijou-kun, right? You did well to spot us. Even though we should have had properly concealed our presence."

Just with that, Leo understood what Toshikazu was trying to say.

"…Have I perhaps interrupted an investigation?"

Toshikazu seemed to be surprised by that good guess.

"Heeh... You're not just brawn. Well, Erika wouldn't support a mere muscle-brain, I suppose."

Though Leo reflexively frowned, aside from whether it was from goodwill or malice, since he was aware of the fact that he was taught techniques, lent specialized weapons, and also supported in various ways, he refrained from rebutting.

"Isn't Mr. Inspector's House mistaking the way of raising daughters?"

The counterattack was at best a degree that would be knocked down for abusive language (would be disgusting).

"That's for sure."

Toshikazu said so with a wry smile. But, contrary to his light tone, the light within his narrowed eyes felt like something deep-rooted.

Sensing danger of having crossed where he shouldn't, Leo shut his mouth.

"Don't mind the investigation. We were just trying to conceal our presence in order to avoid meaningless trouble; it's not like we were tailing anyone. Since late at night here, this is a place where the police would draw looks of resentment."

"Looks of resentment, huh... It's certainly like that."

Leo, looking like he was reminded of something, nodded deeply. That gesture conveyed that he felt sympathy more towards the police than the young people of this town.

If goodwill is turned, the attitude will soften; it's one of the most basic patterns of interpersonal relationships. (This may not necessarily be true with the opposite sex though.)

Therefore, the glint in Inagaki's eyes towards Leo became much friendlier.

"Inspector, isn't it just the right time? Why don't you ask him 'that'?"

With that alone, Leo naturally didn't know what "that" was, but he did not urge on an explanation. Leo was calmly watching Toshikazu, who nodded and turned to face him.

"Saijou-kun, what business do you have today in Shibuya?"

"I have no business in particular."

"Hmm, do you often come to Shibuya?"

"No, not often; I only come here occasionally. I also strolled here on New Year's Eve."

"Two weeks ago, huh… Then, do you know of the strange events that have occurred in the shopping districts?"

Inagaki didn't stop Toshikazu, who was trying to reveal details of an incident over reporting restrictions. At any rate, Inagaki knew that by tomorrow it would be a "scoop".

"Strange events? I thought that such things happen every day. By the way, Mr. Inspector, weren't you in charge of Yokohama city? Why are you investigating the incidents of this town?"

"We are members of the Police Department. We're transferred here and there all over Japan. Because of that, we are now investigating the incident of continuous unnatural deaths in the metropolitan area."

Words which lightly and smoothly flowed out. However, Leo was not misled by his tone.

"Unnatural deaths... Strange murders? And continuously?"

Furrowing his eyebrows, Leo asked. Toshikazu revised his evaluation of Leo upwards without showing any sign of doing so.

"That's right. Well, since it's something that will be known by tomorrow…"

Saying that, Toshikazu and Inagaki exchanged looks. Inagaki nodded, and removed from his overcoat pocket a mobile terminal. Opening the folding-type terminal, he brought up the image file on the screen. Seeing the photo on the terminal, switching in a slideshow, Leo breathed and swallowed his saliva.

"The latest victim was found in Dougenzaka Park three days ago. The estimated time of death is around 1:00AM to 2:00AM."

"Right in the middle of the town!?"

Leo thought that "right in the middle of the town" was a strange expression, but he couldn't come up with a better wording to properly express his feelings.

–He probably thought that this kind of thing happens in sparsely populated areas.

"Leaving aside the daytime, it would not be strange even if something like this happened in the middle of the town at night. At least in this town."

However, as Toshikazu answered back with a bitter expression, Leo couldn't help but nod "You're right". Leo also knew from experience that the present Shibuya had an unusual dual nature.

"Therefore, I would like to ask something; do you happen to know anything about a strange guy? I don't mind even if it is just rumors that you have heard."

"There are a lot of strange guys loitering around this town in the dead of night. Specifically, what kind of guy do you want to know about?"

To Leo's justifiable complaint, Toshikazu, knowing that it's not such a case, leaked a wry smile.

"Certainly, it's not clear. But, the investigation would have been fairly easy if we knew the criminal's features…"

Leo was silently staring at Toshikazu, who was pondering "From where should I begin to explain?"

"Well… The victims' corpses we showed you earlier."

Inagaki did not try to interfere. He also had no intention to stop his superior, who had started leaking secret information of the investigation to a civilian.

"The cause of death for all deaths was unnatural. There was no trace of external injury to find on the seven people."

"There was no injury? Was it poison?"

To the question of Leo, who changed his expression, Toshikazu shook his head.

"The tests of drug reactions are all negative. And even though there is no injury, about ten percent of the estimated blood has been lost from the victims' bodies."

"All the victims?"

"All the victims."

"I see… That is indeed 'unnatural death'. Rather than strange murders, it's a strange incident."

Neither being frightened nor feeling uneasy, Leo muttered so in an amazed voice.

"While it may seem a supernatural phenomenon, the incident is reality."

While being amazed at Leo's attitude, Toshikazu returned the original question.

"So, I wonder if you happen to know a guy likely to perpetrate this by imitating something occult. Particularly with foreigners these days, such as strange rumors, which spread out about those guys."

"Foreigners these days, huh…"

From before being asked again, Leo crossed his arms, but before long, uncrossed them with a look of resignation.

"My bad, no one comes up in my mind."

It was a rude, or rather, a muddled tone as if to say "What kind of manners were those?" but without feelings of wonder or hatred.

"I'm stocking up on jokes from a friend."

"Eh, no, it's alright. That sort of thing is the job of the police, and it is also not limited to sniffing around and not keeping an eye out."

"But Inspector, it is Shibuya at night, you know? I think that having adults, and moreover, policemen, out to ask various things will be difficult."

"...Well, that might be so, but…"

Even without the need to receive indication again, both Toshikazu and Inagaki actually realized the difficulty of an investigation. Otherwise, they

would not go as far as to reveal the secret details of an investigation to a boy who was simply an acquaintance.

"I also don't intend to stick my nose in the danger. And even if I could see it, I have confidence in my sense of smell."

"Really? Then."

"Inspector!?"

Having said that, making a high school student cooperate in a criminal investigation was going too far and too dangerous. Inagaki hurriedly raised his voice as gesture to stop, but Toshikazu brought out a business card from his breast pocket.

"If you find anything, mail me here. You manually enter for the first time, and it's automatically updated from the second."

The good sense of Inagaki was ignored by both Leo and Toshikazu.

"It's really strict. Well then, if I find anything, I'll let you know."

Saying so, Leo stood up, with one hand easily turning the airtight lock's handle that Inagaki had to use two hands to turn, and went downstairs.

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January 14th, AD 2096, USNA Washington D.C. 11:30 local time.

January 15, 01:30 Japan time – Midnight.

Lina, who had gone to bed, was woken up by her housemate Sylvia.

"Sylvie, what is it?"

Lina also became a regular officer not less than three years ago; even if reckoning after she took the post of Stars' High Commander, she had a military career of one year and a half. She grew accustomed to being dragged out of bed in case of emergency. Regaining her consciousness in an instant, she requested an explanation from Sylvia in a clear voice.

"It's an urgent communication from Major Canopus."

To the answer which was returned by Sylvia, Lina silently ran towards the communication device.

"Ben, sorry to have kept you waiting. Excuse me that it's audio only."

『Likewise, it is I who should say so for disturbing you while you were sleeping』

As far as Lina knew, Benjamin Canopus was a man of common sense even within Stars. Among the first Stars class, he might have the most common sense. He, while being aware of the time difference, in other words, while knowing that here in Japan was midnight, called Lina. And it could not be for a trivial matter.

"I don't mind. What on earth happened?"

『We've found the whereabouts of those who escaped last month.』

"What!?"

The desertion incident of the star-of-the-first-magnitude class of Stars, Alfred Formalhaut, which occurred last month, was not only limited to the scandal of Stars, but also gave a great shock to the USNA executives.

That incident did not end with First Lieutenant Formalhaut's disposal by Lina's hands. The fact is that in the same period, seven magicians, and also magic factory masters had escaped from the USNA forces. Within them, although it was the satellite class of the lowest rank, the members of the Stars were also included. The mission entrusted to Lina by Major Canopus back then was the pursuit and disposal of these fugitives. It was about them, he was saying that, their whereabouts were found out.

"Where is it!?"

『In Japan. After landing at Yokohama, it seems that they are currently hiding in Tokyo.』

"Why in Japan… And moreover, in this Tokyo!?"

Lina turned around in surprise. But Canopus also didn't have the answer to this question. It was not only Lina who asked that question, and it was not only Canopus who could not answer it.

『…The Joint Chiefs of Staff decided to dispatch an additional tracker team.』

"Does the Japanese Government know?"

『No, it's a secret operation.』

In a pursuit operation of fugitives coupled with espionage and combat in a foreign territory, the impression given to the partner country government was totally different. There was even a possibility that it could be considered as a serious provocative act to sovereignty, and develop into a rupture of diplomatic intercourse. Lina was once again aware of how the Pentagon attached importance to this matter.

『High Commander, we will pass on the instructions from the General Staff Headquarters. The mission currently given to Major Angie Sirius should assume a priority of second degree, and you should give top priority to the tracking of the fugitives.』

Lina, once after taking a deep breath, answered to the communication device.

"Ben. Please convey to the HQ that I accept it."

『Roger. High Commander, take care.』

The communication cut with those words of worry.

"It looks like I won't be able to sleep any longer tonight", Lina thought.

◊ ◊ ◊

In the classroom at the beginning of the week, the strange murders event was the hot topic.

Sunday morning, every news company came out with what was a veritable festival of articles about the continuous strange murders event in an attempt to compensate for having been out-scooped by the 2nd ranked domestic news site. That their conduct was rather manic, or rather their screws were loose, to the extent that they were trying to make it up to their disappointed subscribers, one could say it was an act of gratitude.

However, because of that, the news quickly spread like wildfire. —But, the main point especially emphasized the occult aspect, agitating the sensation.

"Morning~. Hey, hey, Tatsuya-kun, did you see yesterday's news?"

However, the only people who understood that they are being agitated, but still dared to take advantage of that, were probably people around Tatsuya's age. As usual, definitely without being led, the friend who would seem likely to dance upfront was the very first voice that called out.

"News, you mean about the 'vampire'?"

Even though it was obvious, he was just trying to make sure that this was the general etiquette. Then Erika, as he thought, nodded happily.

"About that, it's after all impossible that it would be done by a single criminal, right? Is it a professional organized crime? My vote is that it is an illegal organization dealing in organs and blood."

Before Tatsuya sat in his chair, she lightly sat on his desk and twisted around and brought her face closer.

At this time, Tatsuya thought 'It's really insignificant, but that body is flexible' which was a really insignificant thing to be thinking about, so he put on a serious look on his face and shook his head.

"If that's the case, then I don't understand why only ten percent of blood was extracted."

So as not to cause trouble in vain to the world, it was certain that the authorities wanted to conceal it, but the fact that the victims lost about ten percent of blood had spread to the society along with, stirring up the complaint of the "Vampire event".

"Wasn't there an intention of killing? Didn't they think possibly to use the blood for a blood factory if using it efficiently?"

"If it's the case, then they would not leave the corpses in the town. Besides, it is a mystery that there was no mark that blood was extracted, either."

In the articles, "After extracting blood with a needle, they erased the traces by magic"; although they also assumed magicians were involved, it was impossible to erase the injection mark permanently with a single use of healing magic.

"Hmm, I see… It's certainly strange that there is no scar."

"As said on TV, is it a homicide by occult means?"

Furrowing her eyebrows from the seat nearby, rather with a somehow nervous expression, Mizuki joined to the conversation.

"Occult means, huh… If there's really such thing as vampires, then it's likely to be known long ago."

Modern Magic, in the process of systematization theory, was welcomed by those who conveyed Ancient Magic from the other side of the legendary veil. If the hobgoblins or the like with substance really existed, their existence should have been disclosed along with that of the "wizards". Tatsuya had at least thought so.

"Then is it Tatsuya's opinion that till the bitter end, it was an act done by humans and not by occult means?"

"What about you, Mikihiko? Do you think that Youkai or demons, those sort of beings are involved?"

He struck back at Mikihiko's question with the content's same question.

Mikihiko chimed "Hmm...", shaking his head back and forth.

"…I can't think that this is the work of a mere human, but I can't make an assertion…"

To the awkward answer of Mikihiko, Tatsuya revealed a nasty smile.

"Speaking of the occult, until just 100 years ago, magic was the prime example of the occult."

Erika promptly leaned forward in excitement.

"Does Tatsuya-kun think that this crime is related to magicians?"

"I haven't clearly thought about it till that point. Neither the street cameras nor the Psion radars that were installed captured any reactions."

Soon after having finished saying so, Tatsuya, as he has reconsidered, shook his head.

"…However, if it is a high ranked magician, he could trick the radars, and if it is a practitioner able to use a Mental Interference External Systematic

Magic, he could also commit the crime in the center of the city without anyone noticing."

"It's unpleasant. It's good that the Humanism trend doesn't become stronger."

Mizuki muttered in a gloomy voice.

The current age's "Humanism", flatly speaking, is a kind of anti-magician movement.

It's a movement that attempts to ban the use of magic, saying that "Magic is not a power permitted to humans," which is the essence of the cult ideology for a sub-sect of Christianity.

The assertion "Humans should live with only the power accorded to humans," or perhaps one should say from the public stance named "Humanism", is a party which has been expanding their influence in recent years in the central east coast of America.

If it's just "stop using magic", then there is no particular harm (many people would agree), but radical elements of Humanism conducted violent acts aimed at the rejection of the very existence of magicians. Even in the USNA they receive their own authorities' surveillance as a form of anti-crime reserve troops (A violent action, USNA always monitored organizations).

"Now that you mention it, I saw those sheep clamoring for that on the TV."

"Morning, what are you talking about?"

Interrupting Erika's speech as usual, in the seat in front of Tatsuya — it's obvious that from the beginning, there was no "homeroom teacher" who would propose a seat change — was Leo.

"Don't you seem quite late today?"

Raising his hand to greet him, Tatsuya asked so. Judging from the impression of his outward appearance, it may be surprising, but it is unusual for Leo to come at the last minute just before the opening so much without margin (to arrive late).

"Ah- I had a little bit of minor business and ended up staying up late... Aside from that, what were you talking about?"

"It's the usual 'Vampire event' we are talking about."

Leo frowned at Mizuki's answer.

A little muttering "Again...?" leaked from his mouth, and at that precise moment, the terminal displays information for the course start. Without time to follow that up, the morning's idle chatter came to a close.

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There was no golden haired companion beside Miyuki, who appeared in the school cafeteria.

Tatsuya didn't feel any doubt or dissatisfaction because he also did not make a separate appointment. Because of that, this question, not that he was that interested, simply came to mind.

"Today you're not with Lina?"

However, his younger sister's answer was outside of Tatsuya's expectations.

"Today, she is absent, Onii-sama. She was in a hurry regarding some business related to her family and the like."

"Hmm...?"

'Absent just after transferring in from overseas?' Tatsuya thought, but since he didn't also know a foreign magician student other than her, he did not assert it to be abnormal. In the first place, if her identity is considered, there should be a lot of things which have priority over school. Besides, there was no way that Lina would have told Miyuki or Honoka reasons more than "House-related". Therefore, Tatsuya did not inquire further.

Erika and Mizuki had displayed concern in her behavior, but — in fact, the difference was that Mizuki was "worried" and Erika was "curious" — more than that, even if he asked Miyuki, he understood that the answer given to them wouldn't necessarily be the truth. Just like that, as usual, though one person was missing (the person missing being Shizuku, not Lina), the seven people crowded around the table.

"Speaking of that, is Shizuku doing well?"

Erika's line of sight turned towards Honoka.

"Yeah, she seems to be doing well. She also said the lessons are not that difficult."

Without even considering the question, Honoka immediately replied. Due to the present era's communication infrastructure, the other side of the Pacific Ocean was not such a big distance.

"However, she said that she was surprised that class discussion forms including teachers still remain."

For this episode, everyone showed facial expressions mixed with surprise and interest. Since the system of students going abroad to learn magic has virtually ceased, what kind of teaching was done in foreign countries was a kind of information that was hardly available.

"Then, maybe Lina is perplexed as well in various ways, right?"

"That really doesn't look like it."

Miyuki, while smiling, denied Mizuki's concern. In fact, Lina did not appear to be perplexed at the difference of lessons structure between America and Japan. 'As if from the very beginning, she has only ever attended Japanese Magic High School', Miyuki secretly revealed a nasty smile.

It was a sexy little devil smile, fortunately no one had noticed it. Her friends' awareness was rooted to the spot at the next bombshell announcement Honoka brought out.

"We spoke on the phone a little yesterday as well, but Shizuku was also surprised at the news of the 'Vampire event'. Somehow, a similar incident seems to have happened in America as well, she said."

"Eeeh! Is that true?"

"I also asked Shizuku the same thing. It seems to take place not in the West Coast where Shizuku is, but in the central area in the southern part of Dallas."

"It's the first time I heard of this..."

Having also recently received warnings from his aunt, Tatsuya, who diligently checked the USNA-related news, unexpectedly muttered so in an admiring tone.

"Even on the other side, it seems that they have a tolerably working information restriction. Shizuku also said that it was not from the news that she heard it, but from a well-informed student who happened to be a former exchange student."

Possibly happy at drawing Tatsuya's attention, Honoka had a bashfully smiling face as she explained.

In the eyes of Tatsuya who nodded, a light strong enough to be said it was just out of curiosity was dwelling.

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At the time that Tatsuya's group had been excited with the topic of their friend who was studying overseas, the blond haired and blue eyed high school student who had come to study from abroad was in a secret meeting at the USNA embassy.

"In other words, you say that in Freddy's, no, First Lieutenant Fomalhaut's cerebral cortex, a neuronal structure never seen in a normal human was formed?"

Though the meeting was encroaching into lunch time, no one there, including Lina, requested a break.

"It may be misleading to say normal human."

The one who answered was a man who, though not wearing the white lab coat, had indeed the appearance of your everyday regular scientist.

"From the results of the autopsy, in Alfred Fomalhaut's brain, a neuronal structure, which has never been observed in the cerebral cortex of a human so far, magicians included, has been identified. Specifically, a structure similar to a small corpus callosum was formed in the pre-frontal cortex."

Seeing there being many participants revealing an ambiguous expression (of course Lina was also one of them), the scientist began to explain once again except this time with a slight lecture tone.

"You know that human brain is divided into the left hemisphere and right hemisphere, right?"

Seeing all the participants nodding, he continued.

"So, the left and right hemispheres are connected by the corpus callosum located in the center of the brain. Conversely, this means that the brain of an ordinary person does not usually have a structure, which only connects the right and left hemispheres of the brain in the center part."

"The pre-frontal cortex is the surface portion of the brain... Originally there should not be a structure which connects the left and right hemispheres of the brain there, right?"

"That's right. In other words, it means that there is something in First Lieutenant Fomalhaut's brain that a human should not have."

Lina finally understood why she personally had to come here today. Certainly it's not something that can be discussed on the phone.

"What kind of function does it perform? I've heard before that the pre-frontal cortex is the area closely connected to the ability of thinking and judgment, but... Can the newly formed brain cells affect the mental capability to that extent?"

"We USNA magic researchers believe that the brain is not an independent thinking organ; the real thinking core is the Pushion Information Body; the brain's role is to receive the information sent from the so-called 'mind', and the communication organ transmits the information of the body to the mind. Although still in the theoretical stage, the possibility is very high."

The scientist, with an ingratiating smile shook his head at the question of the senior officers sitting on the other side.

"If this hypothesis holds, it is conceivable that the new neuronal structure formed in First Lieutenant Fomalhaut's brain links with unknown mental functions, which was not conventionally downloaded."

The attendee yet again had a confused expression. Among them, Lina, who was still lost in thought, requesting to speak, raised her hand.

"Major, what is the matter?"

Although prompted by the scientist to speak, words would not come out. From her red lips, without attracting the men's eyes, Lina spun her tale after three seconds had passed.

"...Doctor, regarding the unknown mental functions, is there a possibility of the intervention of an external magic?"

The scientist was quick to answer.

"I think what Major Sirius is trying to say is that there is a possibility that First Lieutenant Fomalhaut was being manipulated, but unfortunately, that possibility does not exist. Although there is a hypothesis, there is no doubt to assume that the mind and the body interact one-to-one. Even if one could interfere with someone else's mind, it wouldn't be to the extent of affecting the brain's structure. Besides, a magic which alters the mind's very structure does not exist."

From the phrase 'Magic which alters the mind's very structure', Lina remembered the legend of one magician. However, that magician was already dead. At the end of twenty years of hospitalization, without being married, and certainly without having children, that one should have left this world.

Lina slightly shook her head, thinking back to the matter at hand.

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Though it was the afternoon session, the third-year students already had free attendance to school. Taking advantage of the fact that the second-year students were bound in classrooms and practice rooms, two third-year students, a man and a woman, secretly met in an empty clubroom.

However, there was no sweet atmosphere there at all. Despite the fact that both sets of parents regarded the pair as possible marriage partners. (Though one might say that each of them had more than one coupling candidate).

And of course, this secret meeting could only be described as "secret meeting" instead of "date". Katsuto and Mayumi came to this place on behalf of the Juumonji House and the Saegusa House, respectively.

"I wonder why we have to come specifically in a place like this."

"Sorry for that. I judged that it was the least outstanding way. As the Juumonji House, I want to avoid stimulating the Yotsuba as a result, for now."

"There is an ongoing Cold War status between our House and the Yotsuba since last month. Geez, because that sly fox old man did something unnecessary."

Turning towards Mayumi revealing a little grunt of disgust, Katsuto chuckled.

"Even Saegusa can speak in such a way."

"Ara, Sorry. Was it vulgar?"

As Mayumi started putting on a false coquettish air, Katsuto's chuckles turned into a bitter smile.

"When I'm with you, I sometimes happen to wonder whether or not I'm treated like a man."

"It's a misunderstanding, you know? Juumonji-kun is, among my acquaintances, the most manly. It's that simple."

"Can't it grow into a relation between a man and a woman, now?"

"Since the entrance examination, we are rivals of three years."

After each laughed at the other in a hushed tone bout, the two people changed their expression at the same time. Since even while laughing, the heavy feeling of tension was drifting between the two people, one can't say that the atmosphere changed.

"Juumonji-kun. I will convey the message from my father, no, the Head of the Saegusa House, Saegusa Koichi. The Saegusa House expects a united front with the Juumonji House."

"How hasty. Not a 'cooperation', but suddenly a 'united front', huh."

Cutting his speech, Katsuto requested an explanation with his gaze. Of course, even Mayumi intended to give an explanation so that the other party could understand the circumstances.

"How much do you know about the Vampire event?"

"I don't know anything beyond what is reported. Our House doesn't have as many henchmen as the Saegusa House."

To the words that could be taken as Katsuto's humility, Mayumi's lips loosened a little.

"Well, matching for a thousand is the motto of the Juumonji House. Whereas in the Saegusa House, as far as I know, it's only the number that is large."

Mayumi suggestively cut her words.

And, before being urged by Katsuto, continued like this.

"The victims of the Vampire event are exactly three times of what was reported. Twenty-four victims have been confirmed yesterday."

Even if it was Katsuto, he could not help being surprised at this.

"…Is that only in this Tokyo neighborhood?"

"The metropolitan area of Tokyo, and moreover also concentrated in the urban areas."

Katsuto crossed his arms and was quietly thinking.

Mayumi silently waited for him to speak.

"There are victims that the Saegusa House knows that the police don't know. Moreover, it's in a limited narrowed area that damage has occurred (the victim is still in place, being locked into a narrow area)… Have the Saegusa officials been victims?"

"It's half correct. The victims who the police don't know are all our magicians and those in cooperation with us. Even the victims who are not are proven to be either magicians or those who possess the disposition to magic. For example, like the students of the Magic University."

"In other words."

Katsuto's expression tinged with dreadfulness.

"That means the culprit is targeting magicians, huh."

"…Juumonji-kun, you're a little scary."

But the stimulus of that expression seemed to be too strong for a high school girl. Apart from whether it was his real intention or acting.

"Hmm… Sorry."

And even if it was an act, it had enough effect to dent Katsuto.

"We don't know whether there are one or multiple perpetrators of those serial murders; anyway, it is safe to presume that this 'vampire' assumes magicians as targets."

For some reason, by calmly returning to the topic without a follow-up to Katsuto, who started off the melancholy, the true nature of Mayumi showed she was surely a "devilkin" after all.

"In chronological order, first off the Magic University students and staff have been killed, the staff of our House investigating were killed while trying to avenge the previous loss, and meanwhile the victims had also increased, causing this kind of situation."

"Indeed, we can't ignore it."

Leaving the damage received to the edge of the facial expression from Mayumi, Katsuto nodded deeply.

"Are there not any clues? If it's someone who possesses ability to injure the Saegusa magicians, we can only consider either enhanced soldiers or magicians. And also, the possibility that it is a foreigner is high. Either someone who entered the country before and after the case outbreak, or a suspicious person among the foreigners who have gone to Tokyo?"

To Katsuto's inquiry, Mayumi shook her head. It's likely that the Saegusa also considered the same thing and had already investigated.

"But, speaking of foreigners who entered the country before and after the case outbreak…"

Mayumi had faltered there, but in response to Katsuto's gaze urging her to continue, she hesitantly continued speaking.

"From the USNA, there are a lot of foreign student magicians and Magic Engineers who entered the country. There is also an exchange student in this school, who has come… Juumonji-kun, do you think she is suspicious?"

"I think she is suspicious, but she is probably not the culprit."

Katsuto's reply was immediate.

"I don't think she is completely unrelated, but may we leave her for the time being?"

"If Juumonji-kun says so…"

Mayumi also did not seriously seem to doubt Lina. To Mayumi, who cast down her eyes as a loss of self-confidence, Katsuto asked something that was bothering him.

"But, if it is such a thing, I think you should cooperate with the Yotsuba."

To the reasonable proposal of Katsuto, It was Mayumi's turn to frown this time.

"Actually, I think so too, but… this is breaking the unwritten rule here. If Father doesn't apologize and admit his faults, I think that the fence-mending will be impossible."

"But your father has no intention to apologize to the Yotsuba, huh… though it is understandable given the past discord between Maya-dono and Koichi-dono… However, it is really rare for the Yotsuba to harden their attitude until now."

In the policy of independency if portrayed positively, or the policy of self-centeredness if portrayed negatively that the Yotsuba adopted (though, the independence doesn't originally have a bad meaning), they had always adopted the stance of not caring about what the other Houses do. Solidly progressing towards improving their own efficiency, ranked with the Saegusa in the top of the Ten Master Clans only by the virtue of their magic power, it was a Clan which can be said to be heretical even among the Ten Master Clans.

Katsuto had sometimes thought what on earth they even did behind the scenes, but even so, that they were showing a clear confrontational attitude that disrupts the clan meeting was as far he knew. Though, he could not say it to Mayumi, it was the Saegusa who substantially brought up the seeds of conflict.

Thinking that "What on earth had happened?" was probably reflected on his face.

"I don't know the details either, but…"

Mayumi with a bitter feeling reluctantly opened her mouth.

"To a certain section of the Defense Military Intelligence under the patronage of the Yotsuba, that sly fox father seemed to have secretly meddled in. And that was discovered…"

"…I see."

Then, the Yotsuba's firm attitude made perfect sense. To Mayumi, who had a face likely to begin grinding her teeth at any moment, Katsuto could only reply so.

A not too short period of time had elapsed and Mayumi, who finally regained a calm expression, turned again toward Katsuto.

"So, what do you think? Would the Juumonji House collaborate with the Saegusa House?"

To Mayumi who asked once again, Katsuto nodded immediately.

"I will cooperate."

"Although it is the usual thing… it is a really pretty straightforward answer."

To Katsuto's reply, with also no trace of doubt, Mayumi bustled with a shocked voice.

"I have said it before. Since I heard the story, even for the Juumonji House, it is not a situation which can be ignored."

Of course, he would not be Katsuto if he was shaken by that.

Chapter 5

An unbroken stream of pedestrians plodded beneath the night skies of Shibuya. However, from a grandiose perspective, this was a problem restricted to Shibuya only.

Late in the night, there would be brief durations where no one was around, creating small pockets like the eye of a storm. Such as the narrow alleys between the taller buildings and skyscrapers. Like the small parks that dotted the landscape between the intersections of larger boulevards and smaller lanes. –This, was just like the confined green lands which only allowed one step at a time.

Still, even if no one was walking about, it did not mean no one was present. There were two humanoid entities in the park. One was a shadow-like figure who wore a long overcoat and scarf with a round hat covering the eyes, completely concealing any features or hints of gender. The other wore a gorgeous coat over a knitted sweater and mini skirt with a pair of thick heeled shoes and was clearly a young woman.

After covering the female corpse on the bench, the individual wearing the hat rose when a new figure appeared to their rear and struck up a conversation.

(Still incompatible?)

Long overcoat, scarf, hat. This new figure was dressed in the exact same way as the first one and inquired in a voice that did not vibrate in the air.

(Negative. The connection was lost after transferring the replica this time, but just as before, we could only absorb psions from the blood before the replica lost stability and returned.)

The first individual responded to the second in the same soundless voice. The two figures were communicating using telepathy.

(So replication remains beyond us?)

(That's impossible. After all, we ourselves are replicas of the original.)

(Hm…… Then, even if they possess physical compatibility, they cannot become one of us without desires of their own.)

(Are there people in this world without desires?)

(You mean there are other conditions?)

(In order to determine the truth, we need more samples.)

(……That remains unchanged.)

(Just as I am myself and you are you. Nothing has changed.)

(You have a point…… Hm?)

The two figures broke off their conversation over the telepathic link and turned their faces towards the same direction.

(Someone broke through the spiritual barrier. Two…… No, three people?)

(I raised the power of the barrier specifically because I was conducting an experiment. Looks like these are particularly talented individuals.)

(There are only two of us. Shall we retreat?)

(No, this is a rare opportunity. The physical vessel of someone capable of breaking through the spiritual barrier might be compatible. Fortunately, the last member seems to have been separated from the other two. We should be able to neutralize the first two before they meet up.)

(Got it. Then are we of accord?)

Signals of consent were passed along. Leaving the corpse on the bench, the two figures disappeared into the shadows beyond the street lamps.

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Tonight, Leo was again treading the streets of Shibuya. Yet, this wasn't the usual "aimless wandering". He had received details regarding suspicious individuals from a close friend and was hurrying along to verify the veracity of the eyewitnesses.

Even Leo himself did not know why he was so motivated in doing this sort of sleuthing.

A sense of justice? There were other more heinous crimes.

Territorial? Shibuya was not his home turf.

Curiosity? In all honesty, he didn't really care about the real identity of the perpetrators.

At any rate, he felt that this wasn't something he could ignore. This was probably the reason that was closest to the truth.

After searching his feelings, Leo arrived at this conclusion.

Walking at night. Moving in the darkness. Just now, he heard a broken series of noise like the sound of insects beating their wings. This wasn't a sound in the audible spectrum, but a sound that brushed across the deepest recesses of Leo's consciousness.

He couldn't explain why, but Leo was unable to see this as just simple background noise. Nonetheless, Leo's instincts told him that this was the sound of people conversing. This was someone using the magic calculation area in the depths of the consciousness to speak. Following the source of the signal, Leo gradually drew closer.

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Stars was the premiere magic combat force within the USNA. –That being said, not all the American combat Magicians were directly a part of Stars. In reality, of the three Strategic-Class Magicians that were officially recognized within the USNA, only Angie Sirius was affiliated with Stars. The other two were currently split between an Alaskan base and a base in Gibraltar.

Even so, it remained an unshaken fact that the primary source of the USNA's magical prowess in the army came from the Magicians in Stars. This was especially the case for the Magicians granted the rank of planets, as they symbolized the "strongest magical combat force in the world". Precisely since Alfred Fomalhaut was also of planet rank, his desertion inflicted a huge blow to the high command with the USNA. In this particular desertion incidence, the USNA could not draw the line at Fomalhaut alone. They had to execute every deserter as a warning to the rest.

Currently, the two people who were rapidly progressing through the Shibuya night were also hunters dispatched from the USNA army to pursue the deserters and belonged to the unit "Stardust". Like Stars, they too were under the direct command of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but they

were only the remnants of the stars that could not become stars themselves. In spite of this, these magic troopers still possessed considerable combat prowess. They had given up on being well rounded and instead honed their specific talents to the level of the Stars. That was what it meant to be Stardust. This time, the members selected to hunt the deserters specialized in pursuit. They were Magicians who had been implanted in Japan, but had previously remained as inactivated assets, and specialized in identifying psion waves and traces of magic.

Tonight, they finally found the psion trail of one of the deserters, Stars Planet-Class Specialist, Charles Sullivan, call sign "Demus Second", and had closed to within an easy distance on foot.

"Target is in the clearing up ahead."

One of the two came to a halt and nodded at the other's words before removing an information terminal from the coat they wore. After calling up a map, they verified through the search function that there was only one path to the park. There was one entrance to the left of their current position as well as an entrance to the right around the corner.

"We have detected one target. Let's strike from both sides. I'll go right."

Gone were the large coat and skirt, revealing a dazzling set of tights and heavy boots. The outer garb was to better mingle with the young women moving about at night while hiding their identity as American soldiers. The only typical aspect of these female Magicians was that they were speaking in normal tones.

"Understood…… Let's get moving, we don't have much time. Remember, strike at the same time."

"Got it."

The two hunters split off to the left and right.

Beneath the hat pulled low and the scarf, a gray cloth covered in a pattern of black bats obscured the face. Features completely hidden from view, the figure in the long coat walked while keeping an eye on the alley exit. A smirk tugged at the corners of the mouth covered in cloth.

(Pursuers from the military. They have sorely underestimated me if they think two Stardust members will be a match for me.)

(That's based on who you were before.)

Receiving the cognitive signal from his vanished companion, the creature who was once Charles Sullivan turned its derisive smirk into a wry one. Ever since turning into this form, there was no way for him to hide anything from his compatriots. There was no sense of privacy at all. However, the current Charles Sullivan wasn't displeased at this turnout. For them, this was only a natural course of events and did not constitute a source of irritation.

Once he put all his concentration into the depths between his brows, he could also detect what his comrade was thinking about. Through the new sensory organ located between the right and left hemispheres of the brain, they could easily reach consensus. He was the entity known as Charles Sullivan, but at the same time he was also a part of "them".

(I see. Given their knowledge of my rank as a Satellite-Class, we can also predict their movements. I won't need the backup.)

In response to the Sullivan's cognitive signal, this time the sound of bees flapping their wings came back.

(Just in case, I'll still make a few preparations.)

This formulated response came from his other comrade in the vicinity.

Contact between the two sides came in the next instant.

"Deserter, Demus Second. Put your hands in the air and keep them where I can see them."

A young woman's voice cried out in front of Sullivan. At the same time, a silent wave of noise impacted him like cutting through glass.

The real identity of this noise was the psion wave coming from Cast Jammer, a device developed by the USNA Army's R&D Department to inhibit weaponry and equipment worn by Magicians. The inhibitory waves from the Cast Jammer were unlike the background noise that indiscriminately affected all magic like the ones seen in Cast Jamming when using Antinite. The Cast Jammer specifically targeted CAD functions. By intentionally using multiple CADs to generate additional psion waves, this directly interfered with the Activation Sequence's processing. Generally, this type of interference could only occur when one individual's psion waves were interfering with one another, but through the analysis of

their opponent's psion wave signatures, the USNA had successfully neutralized CADs (to a limited degree).

This wasn't something that could be used by anyone. In order to use Cast Jammer, a high level of Non-Systematic Magic was required to release psion wave types. In addition, its effective range was less than 5 meters. Nevertheless, in terms of counter magic abilities that did not require Antinite, Cast Jammer was definitely the USNA Army's ace in the hole in this age.

Faced with the naked barrel of a gun, Sullivan raised both hands above his head as instructed, with both hands easily visible. This order seemed rather vague to the average layman, but its intent was to deny the target the ability to use a CAD. Based on the data in the possession of the pursuers, or executioners in this case, Demus Second was incapable of using magic without a CAD and his physical abilities were that of an average soldier. Ordinarily speaking, once magic was out of the picture, he would be unable to offer much resistance against them, who were both Magicians and augmented soldiers.

"The higher ups have ordered you to be killed on sight. However, if you are to cough up information on your cohorts, a lighter sentencing would be available."

After hearing the hunter say her piece with her finger still on the trigger, Sullivan shrugged.

"Demus Second. You have 10 seconds to decide."

"No, there's no need."

She must have been bemused by the utter lack of terror or anxiety in Sullivan's tone, because she failed to fire any bullets.

"You two should be Hunters Q and R from Stardust."

Upon hearing Sullivan name their call signs aloud, the slightly slackened finger once again tightened.

"There's no way you can beat me."

At the same time Sullivan made this outrageous declaration, a gunshot rang out. Thanks to the silencer, the sound was roughly equivalent to that

of an air gun. However, the bullet fired from this gun could snuff out life with little to no difficulty.

A muffled groan rang out from behind Sullivan. The fired bullet did not penetrate Sullivan's breast that lay directly ahead, but went through Hunter R's arm.

"Didn't you hear? They must have told you to avoid firearms when going up against me."

"This is Trajectory Alteration?"

Once Sullivan condescendingly said those words, Q revealed an expression of utter shock. They knew that Sullivan specialized in magic that altered the trajectory of projectiles, but they also heard that he was unable to use magic without a CAD.

"Could it be that the Cast Jammer was ineffective……?"

"Wrong."

Sullivan didn't even turn around as he directly rejected R's words as she pressed a hand to her arm.

"Cast Jammer is functioning normally. Except,"

Q and R noticed through the surrounding atmosphere that Sullivan's face under the cloth with black bats had twisted into a sneer.

"I have long since surpassed the need to use a CAD."

Q holstered the gun beneath her skirt. The two hunters drew stilettos from their sleeves and charged at Sullivan from both the front and the rear.

A normal human being should not be able to avoid the attacks from augmented physical bodies. Yet, the supposedly normal Sullivan fluidly dodged the attacks. This wasn't something that could be accomplished with athletic prowess. R's blade, which was originally aimed at Sullivan's neck, had unnaturally shifted its trajectory and slid elsewhere. As if being pulled along by the blade, Q slid before R and managed to stifle Sullivan before he began his attack.

"He can even change the trajectory of the blade that's in my hand!? How are you able to manipulate such powerful magic?"

"I have no reason to explain to you why I am no longer who I was."

"Silence!"

Suddenly bursting in a sprint, Q changed the direction of her downward stroke and cut a hole in Sullivan's coat to reveal the carbon armor beneath. Immediately on her heels, R was closing in and striking at the gap between the armor with her blade.

"Ugh!"

Still, R's blade slid across Sullivan's chest as he turned. The blade's trajectory once more went awry, causing R to lose her balance and let out a gasp.

As if performing a magic trick, a blade that looked just like the ones the hunters had materialized in his hand.

Sullivan immediately swung the blade downwards towards R's back.

Yet, his blade bounced back as if it had impacted an invisible wall.

"Inertia Reversal!? And at this degree of strength!"

"Major!"

Sullivan's line overlapped with Q's outcry.

Sullivan immediately realized the implication behind those words and swooped directly towards R, who was still trying to recover her balance.

At this time, blades descended from the skies.

Four daggers flew towards Sullivan's back as he leaped.

Sullivan's body massively slid to one side.

His original leaping trajectory would have led directly to R, but he was forced to slide to the right in order to avoid the descending blades.

The moment he landed, Sullivan immediately pulled R's body towards Q and threw the four daggers towards them.

The blades that flew towards Sullivan rebounded just before hitting the ground and blocked the daggers flying towards Q and R.

Sullivan took this opening to leap onto the walls of the skyscraper.

After kicking off three times from the skyscrapers, he reached the rooftop of the buildings that formed one of the alleys.

A Magician with flaming red hair, golden eyes, and wearing a mask planned to follow the other's footsteps and pursue as she watched his fleeing form.

Still, taking note of the newly active psions bustling about in the alley, she abandoned the pursuit.

Correction, in order to prevent additional victims from appearing, she charged headlong into the depths of the alley.

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Feeling the rapidly growing tension in the air that could mean nothing but combat, Leo's footsteps came to a grinding halt rather than speeding up. He wasn't lying to Toshikazu when he said he wasn't planning on doing anything dangerous. Leo's instincts told him the area ahead of him wasn't somewhere he could safely tread out of curiosity alone.

He removed the information terminal from his pocket and sent a concise message to the address that Toshikazu taught him. The contents were simply "The vampire is here". After reporting his current location, Toshikazu could immediately arrest the suspect of the serial homicides if he was on the ball. Leo planned on leaving the current area before he could be embroiled in another incident, so he turned around – to find a figure laying on one of the benches in the park.

Concern and caution warred within him before caution finally caved in the end. Instead of calling him a goody two shoes, it was more appropriate to say that he was a little deficient in the fear department. This was a weakness only the strong are born with, so suffice to say, a descendant like him also inherited that. Despite this, Leo wasn't entirely defenseless as he carefully and exhaustively approached the young woman's side.

"Hey, are you OK?"

Leo carefully reached out a hand to shake her by the shoulder, but the woman failed to react in any way. When he pressed a hand to the woman's neck, Leo's expression stiffened. The flesh was old, with no sign of a pulse. –Scratch that, while very weak, at the very least there was still something.

Leo frantically pulled out the information terminal and sent out an emergency distress call, this time directed to the ambulance instead of the police. Just as Leo was about to send out a distress call about someone being on the verge of death,

He reflexively turned his head around and raised the hand holding the terminal in front of his face.

The terminal shattered into pieces. By the time Leo was able to recover after leaping back several steps, he already knew that his opponent's weapon was a retractable police baton.

What an odd opponent. Beneath the round hat, only the eyes could be seen since everything else was covered by a chilling white mask. The long overcoat that went all the way from the shoulders to the feet obscured any human form or hint of gender. Nay, forget gender, Leo couldn't even tell if he was fighting a human.

In the depths of Leo's consciousness, the sound of insects flapping their wings could be heard, just as silent as it was before. But this time, Leo felt that this was a "voice" urging its comrade to retreat.

Taking advantage of the fact that he was distracted by the noise, the masked individual had charged in front of him in a flash. Leo was aware that this was Personal Acceleration Magic, but he couldn't detect any sign of an Activation Sequence. It was almost as if they were directly manipulating the Magic Sequence before charging forward. He didn't even have time to call up Fortifying Magic, so Leo could only raise his left arm to block the police baton that was sweeping forward in a horizontal arc.

The next instant, a dull thud heralded something being smashed in.

Seeing the police baton bent out of shape, the masked individual visibly faltered.

"That hurt!"

Leo struck the masked man dead center on the chest, creating the sound of two hard objects impacting one another.

The odd man lurched backwards while Leo shook both his hands as if in great pain. Still, he appeared to have been spared the fate of fractured bones. The left arm that took the full brunt of the police baton also seemed to retain its full freedom of movement.

"Carbon armor beneath that coat, huh? You came well prepared."

Leo inwardly regretted not bringing a weapon while keeping a wary eye on the masked man, falling into a combat stance in the meantime. Leo's gut feeling told him this masked man was the "vampire".

The stranger abandoned the police baton and extended both hands forward. On the left side, the left fist was raised to chin height while the right fist was held before the chest. This looks like Chinese martial arts, Leo thought. Still, there was one other detail worth noting. The size of those fists looked like they belonged to a woman.

The stranger struck with the wind. Personal Acceleration Magic coupled with Move-Type Magic with the wind at their back.

Leo used his jacket, already with Fortifying Magic spread throughout, to deflect the narrow blades that came with the wind.

The stranger's hand chopped towards Leo's left arm.

The stranger managed to grab hold of Leo's left arm.

In the next moment, Leo suddenly felt like his strength was giving way, causing his right fist to come to a halt.

His opponent stretched the right hand towards Leo's chest, right above the heart.

Leo exerted his strength one last time and moved his right fist again.

Just as the masked man's hand came into contact with Leo's chest, Leo's fist struck a major pressure point on the man's waist. The stranger crumpled back while Leo fell weakly to his knees.

He definitely felt his blow strike home, but Leo wasn't sure if that constituted a fatal attack.

If he lost consciousness here, he was as good as doomed. There was no guarantee that his life wouldn't end permanently here. Realizing this, Leo forced himself to raise his head.

The masked man had already risen. While he or she was pressing their chest, it was plain that they hadn't lost combat effectiveness. However, for some unknown reason, this stranger wasn't finishing Leo off or even looking at him for that matter.

Reading the atmosphere, Leo followed the masked man's gaze to find what Leo was forced to admit was a "demon".

Flaming red hair and golden eyes. Maybe because of the distance, the body size looked a little on the petite side, or maybe Leo was plainly losing consciousness.

Within his murky awareness, Leo thought he saw the stranger flee towards the side street, with the demon in hot pursuit.

Fully transformed into her persona as the masked Magician Sirius, Lina briefly wavered after glancing over Leo's crumpled figure on the side of the road. Nonetheless, that only lasted a brief instant before Angie Sirius elected to pursue the stranger. Earlier, the man with the bat masks – Charles "Demus Second" Sullivan – escaped while she was busy providing cover for her allies. There was no way she could afford for this white masked individual to escape as well.

"Silvie, can you trace the psion waves?"

Lina's question was posed to Silvie, who was still at their base. Unfortunately, the answer that came back was not the desirable one.

"I'm sorry. There's too much background noise, so I can't lock on."

"How about the cameras?"

Hearing that the psion radar was unreliable, Lina immediately asked if they could use low altitude satellite imaging to continue the pursuit.

"We still have visual on the target. However, there are a lot of obstacles in the city, so it is unknown how long we can maintain visual."

"Understood. Continue the pursuit."

Knowing that she couldn't rely on technological support, Lina's pace quickened. Obviously, the late night streets were filled with the auras of young men and women, causing the stranger's psion remnants to die out even faster. In order to keep up with the masked individual who was fleeing at superhuman speed, Lina raised the output on her own Personal Acceleration Magic.

Maybe it was because the target noticed she was closing the gap, but the target in the white mask suddenly altered their route. The stranger switched from the streets filled with people to the slopes of the residential sector. The greenery increased while signs of human life decreased.

This actually made it easier for Lina. With less people around, it was easier to differentiate the psions. While the frequency of her losing sight of her target increased, she was now getting more and more familiar with the prints of her target's psion wave. She was almost there, Lina estimated

based off her experience. She finally caught up to her target – or at least that's how it was supposed to be, in the park.

Lina was immediately surrounded by psion noise.

(Cast Jamming!?)

The moment that thought crossed her mind, Lina quickly rejected it. Her Personal Acceleration Magic had not decreased in the slightest. Even if magic applied to oneself received a reduced effect from Cast Jamming, that was still "somewhat more uncomfortable than usual" and not complete immunity. Even for Lina – no matter how capable Sirius's magical ability was, it was impossible to completely disregard the effects of Cast Jamming. Thus, this background noise must come from something else.

(Damn it!)

Lina immediately realized its true purpose. Rather, she personally felt it.

She was unable to pursue the white masked individual's psion remnants. They hadn't disappeared, she was just unable to differentiate them.

Lina finally understood why her target drew her to a place where there was less people about. Sure, it was easier for her to recognize her opponent's psion waves, but the reverse was true as well. This background noise was a type of long distance magic. In order to create this background noise specifically for Lina, the white masked individual brought Lina into this remote location where no one was around.

(……It's a shame, but I can't do this alone.)

"Major, what happened?"

Likely out of concern for Lina, who had suddenly stopped her footsteps, Silvie's voice that came over the ear set was rather perturbed.

"I lost them. Returning to base."

Regretful, but frank, Lina admitted her failure.

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Chiba Erika's day started very early in the morning. Every dawn, her training of blood and sweat was her homework.

Until the age of 10, she had followed her father's instructions without question.

Until the age of 14, when told of who she was, she wanted to be a Chiba swordsman more than anyone else.

Until last March, she always did this out of habit.

Yet, since last April, since she first met him, this was now her own wish.

By her own will, to become even stronger.

At dawn, she didn't hold a sword. Accurately reading Erika's ability, her father had diligently raised her to be the user of the Secret Arte – Yamatsunami, no, trained her for the sake of her becoming the wielder of Yamatsunami. The technique imparted to her struck like the wind and descended like lightning, a sword of agility. Hence during her training, the conditioning of her legs and the ability to run were especially important. In days of sloth where she had lost her goal, the long distance running that she had long neglected was never forgotten again once she vowed by her own will to "become stronger than today".

This morning, Erika woke with her alarm clock and rose from bed. By temperament, Erika wasn't a morning person. Even if her body had a physical reaction, mentally she wasn't entirely awake yet. Even so, thanks to the tens of thousands of repetitions that had ingrained this habit into her, her feet swung off the bed.

Fighting down a yawn, her feet remained steady as she meandered over to her private bathroom. Despite calling it a private bathroom, the only facilities inside were a bathing area and a sink, but the fact that Erika had one of these in her own room was because she was the daughter of a capitalist, and not reared in just any normal family.

The head of the Chiba household was not miserly enough to treat children differently at least on a material level.

The hot water heater was left off even at the height of winter, allowing Erika to use ice cold water to wash her face and finally wake up completely. As she stood in front of her dresser and prepared to put on her

sports clothes, she noticed her mailbox was lit with a notification of new messages.

It was still before dawn. By the local time, it was 5:30 in the morning. She went to bed at 2330 hours last night and there were no unread messages, meaning that this must have arrived late during the night.

Possibly out of some premonition that she couldn't explain herself, Erika immediately opened the message.

Precisely because of its ease of use, e-mail remained in use to this day without being abandoned. Once the subject heading came to view, Erika's brows became furrowed. After reading the entire message, Erika's teeth audibly ground against one another as she managed to grit out.

"That idiotic brother of mine…… What the heck did he ask that moron to do……"

Violently tossing her pajamas to one side, she changed her underclothes.

From her wardrobe, Erika left her sports clothes where they were and removed a sweater and a dress.

Before school started, the bad tidings reached Tatsuya just as he was about to leave the house.

Not by the home phone, but by text to the personal terminal. Normally, these time intensive notifications were reserved for major disasters, which definitely lent an ominous anxiety to this message. Of course, this anxiety could be swiftly replaced with something else by reading the message within.

The sender for this message was Erika.

"Onii-sama, is it bad news?"

Perceptively picking up on her brother's mood fluctuation, Miyuki watched Tatsuya with worried eyes.

Removing his sister from the seed of unease, this particular sort of thinking did not cross Tatsuya's mind at this moment.

"I received a communique from Erika saying that Leo was attacked by a vampire and is currently hospitalized."

"……You must be joking, right?"

The media had a dramatizing effect. For example, in regards to events that happened in neighboring cities, so long as the media had extensive – or even exaggerated – coverage, this might lead to the misconception that this was an event that did not relate to oneself or even came from a fictitious world. To compound matters further, an irregular existence such as a "vampire" committing crimes only served to deepen the lack of realism. Nonetheless–

"It's the truth."

No matter how sudden, there was no advantage in ignoring what happened in front of them. Only by directly confronting these events could any countermeasure be created.

"Looks like he's receiving treatment in a police hospital in Nagano. Luckily, his life is not in danger, so we can pay him a visit after school."

"—Yes."

To Miyuki, Saijou Leonhart was only one of her brother's friends. Since Tatsuya said visiting him after school would be fine, Miyuki had no reason to refuse. –Disregarding, of course, what she was thinking on the inside.

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Today, Erika asked for the day off.

Since she had already notified Tatsuya, Mizuki, Mikihiko as well as the school's administration, pretty much everyone who needed to know already knew.

However, Erika was watching Leo's sickroom in the name of caretaking (that being said, she was sitting on the bench outside of the sickroom), so no upperclassmen would know.

Since the school was free attendance, time wasn't an issue. Still, for the ex-Student Council President and previous Club Groups Leader to inquire about an unrelated student was not within expectations. The present Student Council President and current Club Groups Leader showing up would actually make sense.

Katsuto discreetly glanced at Erika, who was still camped at the entrance, before turning an uninterested gaze towards the door.

Mayumi wore a slightly mischievous smile as she nodded in greeting to Erika and also turned to the door.

Erika didn't stop Mayumi from lightly knocking on the door to the sickroom.

She wasn't here to care for Leo, she was here to watch out for him – to be precise, she wasn't watching out for him either, she was guarding Leo against "uninvited guests" – so there was no reason to stop them.

Erika rose and departed behind them without bidding the two upperclassmen farewell.

Erika's destination was one of the administrative rooms in the hospital.

Her older brother and his confidant were in that room.

When Erika barged into the room without knocking, Toshikazu could only awkwardly, discreetly try to avoid her gaze.

The redness on his face was barely visible. Seeing that the swelling had largely faded from her brother's face, Erika regretted not hitting him harder when she had the chance. (She used her fist instead of her palm this time.)

Besides, it wasn't very often that her "idiotic brother" willingly took a beating without any resistance.

Even if a little, if she could release some of the pent up resentment left over from her adolescent years, she wasn't going to let the slightest chance slip through her fingers.

"……Um, young lady. You're not considering any more violence, are you?"

Her dark fantasies interrupted, Erika turned her sharp gaze on Inagaki.

Overcome by her forceful manner, Inagaki's eyes were drifting all over the room.

Despite the cold shoulder from her father, Erika had the largest number of supporters among the disciples.

She had a bright personality coupled with dazzling looks and, most importantly, she was the only wielder of the Secret Arte – Yamatsunami. In

live combat, she was on record to wield Yamatsunami with ease. Rather than relying on her bloodline as the daughter of the house, she used her own technique, strength, and charisma to seize an almost idol-like stance in the Chiba Family.

In the face of her glare, many of the disciples of her house would cave.

Before all of that, Inagaki wasn't in the same category as Erika. If tapped as a sparring partner, he would simply be a toy for her to play with. With her original outstanding ability and the meteoric rise in the past half a year, the worthy opponents for Erika in the Chiba style were probably restricted to only the current head and her two older brothers. The fact that Erika's ability far exceeded her rank was out of consideration for her older sister who was only mundane in swordsmanship and talent, a fact that was well known among the family's disciples.

"Brother."

At Erika's call, Toshikazu reluctantly turned his head to face her. Although her tone was more masculine, it fit perfectly with the undisguised displeasure Erika wore on her face.

"Right now, that guy should be receiving visits from direct descendants from the Saegusa and Juumonji Families, correct?"

You know exactly what they're here for, don't you? Erika's gaze silently interrogated him.

Inagaki's back became even straighter at Erika's biting words and furious eyes, but Toshikazu wasn't so easily awed by his sister.

"Last night, the woman rescued along with Saijou-kun appeared to be someone from the Saegusa Family."

"And that's all there is?"

"Orders from above. They said, don't investigate any further."

He spread his hands in an exaggerated manner and shrugged his shoulders.

Hearing the answer that she already guessed to be the case, Erika clucked her tongue.

"Setting aside Kasumiseki, Sakuradamon is still within our family's jurisdiction, right?"

"But our division is within Kasumiseki's jurisdiction."

"How useless."

Despite her furious muttering, Erika possessed a firm grip on logic and didn't dissolve into a larger tantrum.

"Wiretapping?"

"Disabled once they entered the room.

I never thought that the Elfin Princess's Multiscope would be so capable."

Elfin Princess was morphed out of Mayumi's nickname "Elfin Sniper", and was an endearing term used by her supporters in the shooting magic competitions. Since the term elf tended to remind people of small creatures, this was a rather appropriate term of Mayumi, but also the same reason why no one used this term in her presence.

"So we're becoming even more useless…… Then, what if we setup the devices outside the room?"

"Neutralized by the sound barrier. That's probably Juumonji's Phalanx."

Hearing Inagaki's objective answer, Erika didn't even want to say the words "how useless".

"Then we can at least speculate. You have a gut feeling, right."

Under Erika's gaze, Toshikazu could only shrug again.

"Just speculating? Looks like Saegusa is hiding the victim."

"……Hiding the body, you mean?"

Hearing a "speculation" that far exceeded her expectations, Erika didn't bother to hide her surprise before asking again.

Hiding the body belonged to destroying the evidence, and while it was fundamentally different from getting rid (abandoning or destroying) corpses belonging to homicides a person was responsible for, this was still breaking the law. Even if the Ten Master Clans retained privileges beyond

the scope of the law, obstructing the police from investigating a large chain of serial homicides was……

Upon arriving at this point, Erika noticed the darker connotation behind this.

"In other words, this 'vampire' incident is related to Magicians, right?"

"Probably. Except we don't know if it's a victim or accomplice."

"Victim? It would actually make sense if a Magician committed the crime so they don't want to hand over the body and tried to dispose of it themselves. If even a Magician is the victim, why are they keeping it from the police at all?"

Hearing his sister's combative words, Toshikazu revealed a meaningful smile.

"Yes, that is precisely the point. This case doesn't seem so simple now, does it?"

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After school.

Tatsuya led the usual party to the police hospital in Nagano to visit Leo. After getting the number of the sickroom at the receptionist's desk, they headed for the elevator. However, it was here that someone called out their name.

"Everyone's here now."

"Erika, you're still here?"

The gist of the situation was already conveyed through the morning text. Erika's oldest brother was responsible for the vampire case, Leo was asked to assist in the investigation, but was unfortunately dragged into the mess. To make him shoulder the responsibility (but not take the responsibility), Erika asked for the day off to visit Leo at the hospital. At least, that's what the text message said.

Yet, they received the communique before school and now it was almost dusk. Tatsuya using the word "still" was probably quite appropriate.

"It's not like I've been here all day. I returned home once today and came back about an hour ago. I guessed that Tatsuya-kun would bring everyone at about this time."

As they got into the elevator as a group, Erika answered Tatsuya's question.

Her voice and expression were not unnatural in the way that someone was lying.

Except, the fact that she was perfectly normal only served to deepen the idea everything was false. On this point, Erika was probably the only one who didn't notice.

"Erika-chan, is Leo-kun going to be OK……?"

Mizuki was standing right next to Erika in the elevator as she quietly asked her question. Even though they were just about to find out with their own eyes, she was probably still uneasy. These emotions differed from one person to another, so some people were able to keep a tighter rein on being objective.

"Don't worry, Mizuki. Didn't I mention in the text message? His life's not in danger."

Nonetheless, this also depended on compatibility between people's differences. Seeing Mizuki heave a sigh of relief and pat herself on the chest, Erika cast a warm gaze at her, but if it was a guy doing this, Erika would undoubtedly be snarking mercilessly.

Even if no one else said it, Mizuki was definitely not the only one thinking the same thoughts. After a few more moments of awkward silence, Erika knocked on the door leading to the sickroom.

"Ah, come in."

A young woman's voice came from within the room.

"Kaya-san, excuse us."

Leaving her bemused friends behind, Erika opened the door and quickly stepped in. At this time, the first one to recover was, of course, Tatsuya.

Before the curtain in the room could obscure Erika, he entered the sickroom.

Miyuki was right behind him. Seeing this, Honoka quickly hurried in as well, with Mizuki and Mikihiko coming in after exchanging a glance and closing the door behind them.

Inside the spacious and undoubtedly high class sickroom, the ones who greeted them were Leo, who was sitting up on his bed with a bored look on his face, and a young woman with ash blonde hair sitting on a nearby folding chair.

She was probably 4-5 years older than they were. Her hair was the same color as the owner of Eine Brise, which gave the impression that they shared the same nationality. In regards to her features, if they were a little craggy and accounting for the gender differences, she would look exactly like Leo, which clearly hinted at her blood relation to Leo.

"This is Saijou Kaya-san, Leo's older sister."

Before the question could be asked, Erika introduced them to the young woman. Her identity was just as Tatsuya and company had surmised.

Kaya rose and respectfully nodded to Tatsuya's group in greeting. While not particularly graceful or well-rehearsed, it was still a degree of solemnness that students were unable to emulate.

After everyone inquired as to Leo's health, Kaya took the flower vase and left the room. While she excused herself to change the water, the unstated reason was because she wanted to give them some privacy.

"What a gentle older sister."

Mizuki murmured once Kaya disappeared through the doorway. These were her true feelings, not just some social rhetoric.

Tatsuya shared similar feelings, and no one seemed to visibly disagree.

Still, Leo revealed a slightly conflicted expression, reminding everyone that every family had its dirty laundry.

"Man, this sucks."

Hence Tatsuya didn't inquire any further. After all, Leo's family situation had nothing to do with Tatsuya.

"I can't believe you guys are seeing me in such a state."

Leo said in embarrassment. There was no longer any trace of conflict on his features.

"Now that I look at you, you don't seem injured."

"I'm not that much of a pushover. It's not like I wasn't resisting."

"Where were you hit?"

At Leo's fearless grin, Tatsuya brought up the obvious question.

With that, Leo's smile vanished.

"That's where I don't understand……"

That being said, this wasn't because he was getting moody. His expression declared that he hadn't given up, but he was honestly uncertain what happened.

"At the moment of contact, I suddenly felt like I lost all my strength. I mustered my will to deliver one last attack, to which the perpetrator fled, while I was keeled over on the ground until Erika's older brother found me."

"Were you poisoned?"

"Well, no matter where they looked, there's no sign of laceration or puncture on my body. Nor is there any foreign elements in my blood."

Truly, a particularly weird situation. Tatsuya also tilted his head while Mikihiko chimed in.

"Did you see their features?"

"Well, I did see something. They wore a hat, long overcoat with carbon armor underneath, and a mask. There was no way to tell facial features or physique, but……"

"But?"

"I got the feeling that it was a woman."

"……A woman has the wrist strength to go toe-to-toe with Leo?"

"That's hardly unheard of."

Erika immediately retorted at the wide-eyed Mikihiko.

"With the right medication, even an elementary girl can strangle an adult male."

"That's true…… But."

"But?"

"There's also the possibility that you weren't up against a human being in the first place."

"Eh? Miki…… Are you telling me you buy into that stuff like vampires?"

Hearing Mikihiko's low muttering, Erika immediately shot back with her eyes bulging out.

"My name is Mikihiko."

His tone remained light, but he still stuck to rejecting that nickname. Mikihiko seemed to have that automatic response prepared. On the other hand, Erika's response wasn't her fault either. The subject was interesting in casual conversation, but people who actually believed in vampires, even among Magicians, were in the extreme minority.

"Do you have any ideas?"

However, Tatsuya's reaction did not belong to either the majority or the minority. Tatsuya didn't believe in demons and ghosts either, but nor did he rule out the possibility of an inhuman creature.

At Tatsuya's question, Mikihiko hesitated briefly before confidently addressing the question.

"I think there's a chance that Leo ran into a 'Parasite'."

"Parasite? You don't mean literally, right?"

Seeing Erika tilt her head in one direction, she didn't seem to think Mikihiko's words were ridiculous. This time was likely out of genuine curiosity. His mood likely buoyed by such a sight, Mikihiko lectured on.

"Paranormal Parasites, aka Parasite. In the modern age where the existence and might of magic have been publicized, modern magic is not the only area seeking international cooperation. Ancient Magic can't

remain stagnant either, so globalization is unavoidable. Heirs of Ancient Magic have hosted many international conferences centered in England, aiming to standardize terms and concepts and refine them."

"I know that Ancient Magic is more progressive on the international cooperation side. What of it?"

Mikihiko was starting to pick up steam when Tatsuya cut him short, causing Mikihiko to cough and rally himself.

"Parasite is also one of the acknowledged terms. Monsters, evil spirits, djinns, demons, of all the various entities in the different countries, we call the magical beings that infest human beings and turn them into inhuman creatures as parasites. Even if Ancient Magic has become globalized, that still doesn't change the fact that they keep their secrets to themselves, so it's not surprising that everyone here with a modern magic background doesn't know about it."

"I can't believe the monsters and djinns actually exist……"

After listening to Mikihiko's explanation, Honoka murmured in fear.

Tatsuya dropped a hand onto her shoulder.

"In the past, no one believed that magic existed. However, we are capable of using magic. Even if we were ignorant of their existence, there's no reason to be afraid."

This was not a natural reaction on Tatsuya's part. He knew these words coming from him would have a profound reaction on Honoka.

Which is why Tatsuya retracted his hand after Honoka jumped at the human contact and he was sure that he dispelled that blind sense of unease. Of course, he was also aware of how Honoka lamented the lost opportunity, but he pretended to be oblivious.

"So that's the vampire's true identity."

Afterwards, he glanced at Mikihiko. Being overly fearful served no purpose, but he was also well aware that ignorance could compound the threat.

Without directly replying to Tatsuya's question, Mikihiko turned a determined look at Leo.

"Leo."

"Um, what?"

Leo was overwhelmed by the ardor in those eyes.

"Can I examine your spectral form?"

"Spectral form?"

It appeared that the term spectral form didn't register, seeing as how Leo could only parrot back the pronunciation. On some level, this wasn't Leo's fault, since it was due to neither "spiritual form" nor "soul vessel" being terms used in modern magic, rather than Leo being too slow to pick them up.

"Spectral form refers to the information body that is shaped like the physical body, except that it links the physical flesh with your spirit."

Mikihiko used his fingertips to trace a large "spectral form".

"The key to the spectral form is life, or life force. Monsters that devour the flesh and blood of man are rumored to prey on the life force that is taken with the flesh."

"In other words, while vampires suck blood, what they're really looking to do is sucking away the life force?"

Mikihiko nodded with a tight expression at Erika's words.

"Vampires drink blood and ghouls consume flesh, but since they weren't material beings in the first place, they should only be interested in life force. At least, if what the elders in Ancient Magic told me is to be believed."

"Based on that line of reasoning, it shouldn't be surprising to run into a vampire who relies on sucking out the life force, huh."

Tatsuya murmured at Mikihiko's words.

In response, Mikihiko nodded once more.

"If I can examine Leo's spectral form, I think I should be able to find out. ……Honestly speaking, I was never convinced that this vampire incident was caused by normal human beings. It always seemed like something more than just serial homicides, and not just because there was no trace of

blood being sucked out. My instincts as an Ancient Magic user tell me this, except I have no proof. Precisely because it was only my gut feeling, I never told everyone about Parasites. However, now even Leo has been attacked."

"Go ahead Mikihiko."

Leo overrode Mikihiko's self-incriminating words. Mikihiko took a long second to process the meaning behind this concise phrase.

"……Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Actually, it's more like I'm requesting you do so. There's no way to respond if we don't understand the cause."

Leo's underlying meaning also contained forgiveness. In response to this degree of trust, Mikihiko's expression tightened once more as he reached his hand towards the bag next to his feet.

Wielding bona fide talismans created with black ink on paper, Mikihiko used traditional mediums that even Tatsuya came across for the first time to verify Leo's status, and failed to disguise his shock. More likely, he never even thought of doing so in the first place.

"How should I say this…… While Tatsuya is also in a league of his own, Leo, are you really human……?"

"Hey, how polite of you."

It was another thing altogether as a joke, but when faced with those words spoken in dead earnest, even Leo wasn't able to laugh it off.

Leo's mood was plainly affected.

However, Mikihiko was already astounded enough to miss this completely, or more like he wasn't even able to detect this.

"No, but…… How are you still up and about? The average Magician would be unconscious if so much life force was devoured."

"Setting aside exactly what life force is, can you also detect how much is missing?"

Tatsuya's expression showed how impressed he was, to which Mikihiko replied back with a neutral smile and a nod.

"That's because the spectral form and the physical body possess the same shape.

Since the capacity size is a given, the original amount of life force compared to the current level is more or less detectable."

Mikihiko squinted his eyes and once again gave a measuring look at Leo.

"Currently at Leo's life force level, forget even crawling, the average person wouldn't even be able to remain conscious. To be able to sit up and still converse like this, his physical capability must be astounding."

For Mikihiko, this was something that just popped out.

However, the phrase "astounding physical capability" struck Leo in the heart because of his genetic modifications to raise physical prowess.

"Probably. My body is specially designed."

Even so, Leo kept up his smile. He didn't plan on causing a fuss at someone who unknowingly caused him harm.

"At any rate, right now I feel powerless because that masked woman ate my life force. Is that how it goes?"

Leo suppressed the fluctuations in his heart and asked.

"I think so, but……."

"But?"

"……Since this was during combat and they have the ability to consume life force on contact, there should be no reason to suck blood. While I have no idea how they can take blood without leaving any wounds but…… Why is this Parasite wasting additional time and energy doing something extraneous like sucking blood?"

Even Tatsuya had no answer to Mikihiko's query. In truth, this was because blood was lost instead of being sucked away, so right now they had no way of arriving at the truth.

Visiting hours came to a close and five people left the sickroom.

The five people were Tatsuya, Miyuki, Mikihiko, Honoka, and Mizuki.

Erika said she had to meet up with her brother Toshikazu and stayed behind.

Although none of the five understood those words at their literal meaning, again, none of them verbalized this.

"Speaking of which – Mikihiko."

"Hm?"

Suddenly being called on, Mikihiko turned from his conversation with Mizuki and switched over to Tatsuya.

Miyuki and Honoka flanked Tatsuya.

While they weren't holding onto his arms, the physical distance was close enough to make no difference.

Let all the popular men burn. Except there was no way of knowing whether Mikihiko was truly thinking this.

No matter what Mikihiko thought, it was unlikely that Tatsuya would pay heed to it.

"There was one detail I forgot to ask."

Actually, he intentionally failed to ask this question out of concern for listening devices. Even for someone other than Mikihiko, getting Tatsuya to cough up dangerous information was extremely difficult.

"What is it?"

"In regards to creatures like demons and Parasites, do they occur frequently?"

Even though they weren't eating, Mikihiko almost gagged.

Owing to Tatsuya's nonchalant tone, Mikihiko listened in with only a casual mood, only to hear a rather profound question.

"……No, they are really rare. While in the stories they exist in hiding ready to do evil, those are largely Magicians pretending to be dark creatures. For

example, our side believes they have determined the true identity of the infamous spirit at Mt. Oyama to be a practitioner from the Middle East."

Unconsciously, Mikihiko was stroking his chin just like someone in a "contemplating posture".

"The chances of a Magician running into a real spirit is about…… Maybe one in ten generations. Even so, those encounters are usually something accidentally stumbling into our world. Real incidents of spirits harming humans that necessitated immediate extermination from Magicians probably occur only once every several hundred years across the globe.

At the end of the day, the last time on record that Japan exterminated a true spirit was probably when Yusanari Abe exorcised the nine-tailed fox nine hundred years ago."

"Yet, this vampire incident was probably done by a 'real spirit'."

"I believe so."

"Do you think this is a coincidence?"

"While I cannot say for certain, but the probability is near zero……"

Mikihiko's reply was extremely prudent.

"As history has progressed into the modern age, incidents of spirit activity have been on the decline. I am unwilling to believe that this incident came out of nowhere."

After hearing Mikihiko's response, Tatsuya softly said "Indeed."

After making sure that Tatsuya's group left and Kaya returned to the room, Leo collapsed back onto the bed in exhaustion. Although Erika was still in the room, he had already pushed himself to the limit.

"……Meh, I already know everything anyways.

There's no need to keep bluffing any longer, OK? You've already worked really hard."

"……I'll just…… Take that as an honest…… Compliment."

"It was an honest one. Compliment, I mean."

Seeing Leo painfully close his eyes, Erika revealed a warm smile.

"Um, Erika-san…… Is my brother really going to be fine?"

Still, seeing this interaction, Kaya didn't seem to find anything funny.

"No worries. I've already called the best doctor the Chiba Family knows of. I know it can be a little difficult for you to understand since you're not a Magician, but life force exhaustion requires more time to recuperate than physical exhaustion. All of the necessary recovery procedures have been done already. Afterwards, the best medicine would be plenty of bed rest, so he'll be fine after a while."

Kaya shook slightly at being identified as a mundane. Though Erika noticed this, she didn't espouse any comforting words from her mouth.

"Then, I'm headed off to my brother's place. If you need anything, please don't hold back and call the nurses, my brother's subordinates, or even myself."

Erika gave a cursory bow to Kaya and excused herself from the sickroom.

Leo had no intention of chiding Erika for her attitude.

"Young mistress, can you show a little mercy?"

The moment she entered the room that was listening in on Leo's sickroom, Inagaki called out to Erika.

Although his words were vague due to several omitted words, Erika knew exactly what he was talking about. That being said, Erika also held those words in contempt.

"I don't plan on requesting any Magician to take care of him. It doesn't matter if it's our parents or siblings, they're all a hassle to deal with. I think keeping this degree of relationship here would be enough. Speaking of which…… You heard what was said in there."

The last sentence was directed towards Toshikazu.

Erika's oldest brother was sitting with his back to a chair and both hands clasped behind his head before he brusquely peeled off his ear set and straightened up.

"It was very interesting. Then, assuming the second son of the Yoshida Family is spot on with his theory, Erika, what do you plan on doing?"

"Under these circumstances, it doesn't matter if he's correct."

How tedious, Erika's condescending gaze seemed to accuse Toshikazu as he sat on the chair.

"Even for a moment, that guy counts as a member of the Chiba style and is one of our own. In addition, I personally instructed him in the art of the sword, so he technically counts as my first disciple. No master could just stand by while their disciple took a beating."

"What a cold line of reasoning."

"There's nothing there, so stop fishing. Even if they don't exist, there's plenty of reason to accept the fight. I have no idea whether the vampire is male or female, they were the one who gave the offense. All we have to do on this side is accept."

Even her brother Toshikazu had no idea if she was being truthful or prevaricating.

The only thing for sure was that Erika was dead serious, that's all.

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At the same time that Tatsuya was visiting Leo, Lina arrived at the Tokyo branch for Maximilian Devices. This was where Michaela Honda was working under the alias Mia Honda, and also one of the secret meeting grounds for the unit hunting for the deserters.

Even if not to the degree of magic university students, it wasn't particularly rare to see magic high school students visit CAD manufacturing sites. A letter of introduction from the embassy and First High's uniform enabled Lina to pass through all security and enter a conference room, where she met the two Stardust members she rescued last night in the nick of time, who were dressed in tight skirts and tunics.

"Major, thank you for the help last night."

"At ease."

Lina gestured for the two saluting members to sit before she also took a seat on the sofa. After closing her eyes and breathing deeply out, a pair of golden eyes opened beneath flaming red hair.

A completely different color than Angelina Kudou Shields, and a completely different face.

Still, neither of the two Stardust members betrayed any surprise on their faces. This golden eyed young girl with a cold face was their Angie Sirius.

"You two, what is the extent of your injuries from last night?"

"Mostly healed. It will not affect our mission."

Hearing the hunters refer to themselves as mere tools, Lina, no, Angie Sirius wrinkled her brows, but that only served to deepen the cruel impression on her cold features rather than betraying her displeasure.

"Is that right. Then give me your sit rep."

"Yes, ma'am."

Lina herself felt that those words didn't convey the complete picture, but it looks like the other side got the hint.

"After picking up the trail on Demus Second, we utilized Cast Jammer based on the target's profile. However, Cast Jammer failed to have any effect on Demus Second."

"Did he affect Cast Jammer's operation?"

"Negative, Cast Jammer was functioning normally. Based on Demus Second's words, he no longer requires a CAD."

"No longer requires a CAD…… Does that mean Sgt. Sullivan has achieved spiritualization?"

"I concur."

In response to Lina's suspicion, the hunters replied in the affirmative.

"The current Demus Second did not need a CAD to use Trajectory Alteration."

"So no other magic was used."

"Affirmative."

"In addition, Demus Second possesses superior physical capabilities compared to our augmented bodies."

That the deserter's physical prowess had increased was fresh intelligence. Lina slightly turned this over in her head before carefully asking the two of them the next question.

"Has Sgt. Sullivan's psion wave signature changed?"

"At least, we're still able to identify it."

"During my pursuit of Sgt. Sullivan, I suspect he made contact with his comrades. However, I was unable to observe that person's psion wave signature."

"……My apologies. We detected no other psion wave signature save for the Major and Demus Second."

Lina closed her eyes and considered this for a moment.

"……Looks like our old data is no longer reliable. From today onward, continue surveillance on any deserters that you found the trail for and do not engage. Wait for me to arrive before engaging."

"Yes, ma'am."

Returning the salute of the two Stardust members who had risen to their feet, Lina exited the conference room.

In the halls of the Tokyo branch for Maximilian Devices, Silvia was waiting for Lina.

"High Commander, this way."

Hearing this, the red-haired, golden-eyed Lina followed Silvia. Their destination was the women's changing room for the employees.

"This way, Major. I've already ascertained the premises are empty."

Following Silvia after she unlocked the door, Lina swiftly glanced around the changing room and only let out a sigh of relief after hearing the lock on the door click home.

Her hair and irises changed color.

The red hair turned blonde and the golden eyes returned to their azure hue.

"As expected, this way is much easier. Compared to keeping 'Parade' up, hiding the ability to use magic is much harder."

"Major, there's no time. Please change before the employees return."

Silvia immediately started nagging the relaxed Lina.

Lina shrugged her neck and started speaking to Silvia as she was changing.

"Looks like the pursuit unit couldn't identify the psion wave signature of the person in the white mask either."

"Really…… Looks like there are massive individual power level differences between the deserters."

Maybe it was because she already had a premonition of what Lina was going to say, but Silvia's voice wasn't very amazed. Still, a dismayed aura hung around her shoulders.

"Speaking of which, why are they attacking the Japanese?"

Dressed in her underwear, Lina asked Silvia as she reached for her First High uniform.

"What do you mean by why?"

Unable to ascertain the intent of the question, Silvia returned a confused question.

"They are currently being pursued. Normally, wouldn't they try to hide their presence as much as possible?"

"Ah, so that's what you mean."

At this point, Silvia finally understood what threw Lina for a loop. What Lina really wanted to ask was why the deserters were running the risk of revealing their location in order to attack Japanese people.

"I don't know either, except……"

"Except what?"

After changing her stockings for a pair of underpants and in the middle of putting on her gown, Lina urged her to keep speaking.

"I just feel that there is a connection between this and the new power they have been granted."

"New power…… You mean the vampire's ability to remove blood without leaving any wounds?"

With the outer jacket and gown in place, Lina kept up her questions while fussing over her hair.

"While I'm not sure if we should call them vampires, but…… Lina, what are you doing?"

Just as Silvia was trying to organize her thoughts, her gaze once again drifted over to Lina.

Only to find the beautiful young woman with blond hair using both hands to lightly lift the two sides of her inner gown before the mirror as she struck a few poses.

"Eh, no, this is....."

Seeing her superior officer quickly recover her posture and drop her head while blushing the entire way, Silvia could only heave a deep sigh.

Chapter 6

The swung fist impacted another one.

The physical positions switched in an instant, with offense and defense seamlessly switching between one another.

Tatsuya and Yakumo were engaged in their daily morning bout.

They weren't just taking turns battering one another.

Besides direct attacks, there were also left and right hooks that came from above and below, karate chops and palm strikes. Avoiding the attack, seizing the opponent's extended limb, all while fending off the opponent's other limb that was seeking to dislodge the counterattack at the last possible second.

In terms of martial arts right now, Tatsuya and Yakumo were equals.

Both of them extended their right arms.

With both attacks simultaneously missing one another, the two of them were now in a position where their backs were to one another.

Tatsuya shifted his center of gravity and raised the leg he was originally putting all of his weight on and took a step forward.

The expected elbow strike failed to arrive.

He turned.

Just like Tatsuya, Yakumo had pulled back to a safe distance.

Seeing that they both used the same sort of attack, executed the same evasive maneuver and ultimately created an unnecessary gap between the two of them, the obligatory wry smile – There was no time for any of that.

Tatsuya stepped towards Yakumo.

In terms of techniques, the two of them were neck to neck.

Tatsuya also held the edge in terms of physical prowess.

Strategy was where he fell far behind Yakumo.

In summation, the only path to victory lay in a continuous stream of attacks from Tatsuya to avoid giving his opponent any opportunity to devise any stratagems. Any situation that created unnecessary separation between the two left Tatsuya in an unavoidably inferior position. As soon as he stepped into the gulf and was prepared to swing his fist forward, Tatsuya felt that Yakumo's presence was wavering.

Tatsuya had suffered quite a bit recently at the hands of this technique. He forcibly suppressed his frustration and activated Gram Demolition.

Yakumo's wavering body quivered briefly before disappearing. Tatsuya's Gram Demolition managed to nullify Yakumo's ability.

Tatsuya fully extended his five senses and sought the location of Yakumo's actual physical body.

Right? Or was it the left?

Even someone as strong as Yakumo shouldn't have the time to sneak all the way behind him.

Tatsuya's analysis was perfect.

But Tatsuya's hypothesis was flawed.

Yakumo was standing right in front of him.

He was thirty yards behind the place Tatsuya aimed at.

It only took an instant to land the decisive blow.

The forestalled fist once again flew out.

Normally, this was an unreachable distance, but Yakumo had also taken into consideration that the moment the blow landed, there was still the possibility of mutual defeat.

Except, Yakumo's body was not advancing with his fist.

Completely blindsided by the fist that was displaced from the body, Tatsuya's body was flung into the air by Yakumo's throw.

"Whew, scary, scary."

Yakumo finally released Tatsuya's joint after throwing Tatsuya to the ground while espousing words that didn't sound like he had been holding back.

Since his wrist had been captured, Tatsuya was unable to execute a perfect landing. While he managed to dull the impact and prevent any fractures, he still took the blow and needed to cough a few times in order to restore his breathing to normal.

"...Master, that was?"

Hearing the words Tatsuya spoke after finally getting to his feet, Yakumo rubbed his temple with one hand as he replied back. –Probably because he was wiping away the sweat.

"Hm, I didn't think you would be able to break through Mirage Cloak."

While his tone remained as though he were joking, his astonishment was dead serious. His feint with the after image wasn't something that was planned ahead of time and was a spontaneous creation. That was because Yakumo never imaged that Tatsuya could break through Mirage Cloak.

"So that technique is called Mirage Cloak, eh...Master, that's no ordinary illusion technique, is it?"

"So you did see it."

Although Yakumo was sighing in an exaggerated manner, he failed to hide the fact that he was highly pleased. –Most likely, he never planned on hiding it in the first place.

"Your ability to read an opponent's technique may be a threat to your enemies, but that doesn't mean there isn't a way to take advantage of this."

"Like your earlier illusion?"

"Mirage cloak was a technique originally designed to shield against eyes that are not of this world.

As for its design.... Well, you go ahead and ponder on your own. If it's you, you should be able to grasp it in an instant."

Tatsuya didn't tell Yakumo to stop beating around the bush. Part of the reason was because asking about the techniques of others was forbidden, but what drew his attention even more was Yakumo's choice of words.

"Master."

"Hm? What's with this serious expression all of a sudden.... Well, you're always like that, but now you've got that scary voice too."

There was a fine line between praise and mockery when it came to that line about always wearing a serious expression, which Tatsuya finally chose to ignore because he was unable to decipher which one it was – which meant he did nothing whatsoever.

Somehow, Yakumo's expression seemed less than pleased, which probably denoted that he made the right decision. Furthermore, Tatsuya wasn't in the mood to play along with his jokes (?).

"Earlier, you spoke of things that were out of this world."

"Ah, so that's what this is about."

There was no need to complete the half-finished sentence.

His reply left no room for misinterpretation, as if he had predicted that Tatsuya would ask this question.

"Our enemies are not restricted to just humans. It isn't that rare for some of them to strike a bargain with forces beyond this world."

While this was the expected answer based on their earlier conversation, this response ran counter to the knowledge he already had.

"However, one of my friends who is an Ancient Magic user claims that encounters with actual spirits are rare occurrences...."

Tatsuya wasn't saying this because he believed one person over the other, but because he wanted an answer that he could believe.

"I recall that Tatsuya-kun's friend is the second son of the Yoshida Family. While his words are also true...in your case, I believe you didn't consider the matter thoroughly enough."

Yakumo temporarily halted speaking there. After receiving the request to think things a little more thoroughly, Tatsuya immersed himself into a sea of considerations and arrived at a solution after a short period of time.

"Mikihiko's words are correct, but at the same time, imperfect. Is this what you're referring to? Actual run-ins with bona fide spirits are extremely rare, but incursions because someone else provided the impetus are not that infrequent, am I right?"

"I'll give you the minimum passing grade."

As befitting his words, Yakumo's expression was far from satisfied.

"Hm...I guess even a sage like Tatsuya-kun would fall prey to association bias and cognitive traps."

Apparently, the bar was set quite high and the scoring much more ruthless.

Even so, Tatsuya felt that it was too shameful (and not embarrassing) to be called a "sage" to the face and prayed that this would not be repeated.

It was a testament to how unruffled Tatsuya was when being praised in spite of his mistake.

Still, Tatsuya's poise was brushed aside by Yakumo's following words.

"You too should have had a brush or two against creatures that do not exist in this plane. In regards to what you modern magic practitioners refer to as SB Magic, what do you think they use as a medium?"

A small "Ah" escaped Tatsuya's lips.

"I see you connected the dots. What modern magicians refer to as Spiritual Beings are legitimately 'creatures from another world'."

This was indeed a blind spot. Tatsuya focused on Yakumo as he continued to explain.

"Ah, conscious thought and self-awareness are both secondary. Bacteria does not have consciousness or self-awareness, but it is able to enter the human body and affect the operations of the human body enough to impact health. In addition, they even have the incomplete ability to self-replicate. However, even if they don't fulfill the requirements of a 'living

creature' at the intellectual level, that's not enough to deny that they are 'living creatures' with the ability to infect the human body."

"You are saying that Spiritual Beings – nothing more than isolated spirit bodies removed from physical phenomena also qualify as 'creatures not of this world'?"

"Strictly speaking, they are more like creatures who do not possess a physical body. In addition, has anyone proven that spirits do not possess thought of their own?"

"...It is true that no one has done that. On the other hand, I know of one person who might."

Furthermore, Tatsuya had personally beheld that friend of his manipulating spirits right in front of him. In comparison to receiving orders and having the spirit decide on their own, it made more sense that the entire process was incorporated inside the Magic Sequence and the spirit possessed consciousness of its own.

"Master, may I ask another question?

"Go ahead."

"Modern magic believes that a Spiritual Being is an information body isolated within the information dimension from its natural phenomena. Since it originated from natural phenomena, it is possible to use Magic Sequences to recreate the original effect. This is the current theory behind Spiritual Magic."

"Pretty much. Modern magic is truly impressive if it's capable of coming up with this kind of theory."

"Then, for the parasites that latch onto the spectral forms of human beings and cause mutations, where do their information bodies come from?"

After hearing Mikihiko's words, Tatsuya suspected that Parasites were information bodies that could affect the human Eidos. Yakumo's allusion to bacteria and diseases only served to deepen that impression.

"Parasites...what an English way of putting it. Alas, I am unaware of where these information bodies originate. Given that they are able to affect human spirit, I would imagine they came from a similar origin."

"Information bodies from the human spirit...."

"I believe, regardless of whether the monster comes in humanoid or beast form, the only thing that can cause the living creatures of this world to alter in such a fashion must come from demons originating from spirit information bodies. Afterwards, just as how the physical manifestation of these spirits have one step in our world and the alternate shadow of this world, demons originating from the spirit also straddle the mental landscape and the aether. The reason that spiritual encounters are infrequent is not because they don't exist, but because we are not equipped with the ability to observe the human spirit. While this line of thinking would definitely be heresy in the eyes of London, these are my true feelings on the matter."

As expected of a major authority on Ancient Magic, that name wasn't just for show.

It had been a long time since Tatsuya thought that way.

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Two days later, Leo was still confined to bed. The average person would already be in a critical state of unconsciousness, so not being able to check out of the hospital for three to four days was considered normal. On the other hand, people would be more worried that he was pushing himself too hard or being reckless if he was actually able to leave the hospital so quickly.

At least, that's what Tatsuya thought.

However, on some level, it was only natural that there were people who didn't think that way.

"Leo-kun, how is he feeling...?"

Mizuki was precisely the type who didn't think that way.

"He should be alright. They said that there were no signs of external injuries besides some bruises, and there's no sign of fractures or internal pain. Unless you believe that Erika is lying?"

As a side note, Tatsuya actually suspected that the currently absent Erika was being less than truthful.

"That's not what I meant...."

Still, based on Mizuki's temperament, even if she harbored such a thought, there was no way she would be able to accuse her friend of lying.

Even if the person in question was not present, scratch that, it was precisely because the person in question was not present that she avoided talking behind their backs.

Also, the reason that Erika wasn't in this place – the classroom before class begins, was not because she was watching over Leo at the hospital, but merely because she hadn't arrived at school yet.

Yesterday, she also rushed in just before the bell rang.

Today was probably going to be a similar case.

"Now that you mention it, Mikihiko isn't here yet either."

This comment was not made with any prior considerations in mind. This was only because while he was ruminating over why Erika hadn't arrived yet, he just remembered that Mikihiko was still absent.

At those words, Mizuki's face turned a little stiff.

Tatsuya quickly reined in his facial muscles that were on the verge of relaxing into a grin and debated over whether to say something or remain stoic. He truly believed that what Mizuki was worrying about could not possibly come to pass, but he was unable to judge if this was a good time to broach the subject.

"Good morning~."

"Good morning, Tatsuya, Shibata-san...."

Just as Tatsuya was bewildered over which action to take, Mikihiko and Erika entered the classroom wearing equally exhausted expressions.

Just as the two of them sat down, the display monitor flashed the signal that class had started.

During lunch break that day, Tatsuya and his group behaved a little differently than normal. Instead of going to the cafeteria, Erika was slumped over her desk. If one paid careful heed, small snores could be heard emanating from her.

There was no way to take a nap during class because they were logged on to their terminals, but now she was fast asleep.

Mikihiko said "his head was buzzing" and immediately left for the infirmary after finishing lunch. It appeared that his headache, and not murky state of consciousness, was also brought on by overexhaustion.

Since he expected this to be simple exhaustion, he left everything regarding Mikihiko to Mizuki.

Then, as for Tatsuya himself,

"Shizuku, sorry for calling you so suddenly."

"Hm, what's up?"

"Well, Tatsuya-kun said he had something he absolutely had to ask Shizuku."

He asked Honoka to ring up Shizuku by phone.

"My apologies for calling you at such a late hour. I wanted to send an e-mail, but I felt that this definitely needed to be communicated directly."

Even smaller handheld devices in modern communication systems could depict images that were almost like face to face conversations. The image that came through his personal handheld device was Shizuku, who was also using a similar device to communicate. While it has only been a short month since they last saw one another, she seemed to have visibly matured a little bit.

"No worries. It's only 8pm over here."

The young girl on screen squinted her eyes as she smiled. As usual, this was a rather vague expression to read, but by now they all knew that this smile meant she was exceptionally pleased.

Honoka and Miyuki vengefully glared at their own terminals.

Unfortunately, Tatsuya had put Shizuku on the main screen and vice versa. Personal handheld devices differed when viewing through the main screen or side screens in that it was difficult for the latter to differentiate facial expressions.

"So, what's up?"

"Ah, I heard from Honoka that you also have a vampire incident near you. If you are aware of any details, I was wondering if you could divulge them."

Shizuku's head lilted to one side on the screen.

"...Shizuku?"

"...Ah, that incident. Um, are there really vampires appearing in Japan?"

"What do you mean by Japan?"

"They're still treating it like an urban legend over here in America. At the very least, there's no media coverage."

Though somewhat different from myths or storybook creatures, vampires, or more accurately spirit-devouring demons, truly existed.

Given that an actual entity was relegated to a rumor, something must be afoot. In other words, this incident was still being censored in the USNA. There was now a possibility that the web was more complex than he previously imagined.

"Rumors are fine. I would like to know as much as possible."

"Did something happen?"

Shizuku leaned forward on the screen.

Tatsuya deliberated over when to inform the young girl on foreign soil by herself that one of their friends had been attacked.

"Leo was attacked by what we suspect to be a vampire."

Yet, he immediately made the decision that she had the right to know.

In the end, Tatsuya himself was unable to explain why he made that choice.

This may have been an instinctive response.

Alternately, he might have felt a premonition of what is to come.

"Fortunately, his life is not in danger."

"How...?"

Still, causing the person on the other side of the line to worry needlessly was not his original intention. Though Tatsuya added another sentence to help alleviate the shock Shizuku felt, they unfortunately seemed to fall on deaf ears.

"No, he's actually fine, so please don't have that look on your face, alright? Leo used his own strength to repel the perpetrator, except he was slightly injured by his opponent's special powers during that time. Currently, he is resting in the hospital."

Tatsuya's "comforting words" definitely failed to constitute anything remotely capable. Any words like hospital rest would only inflame her unease if she was of a weaker constitution.

"Really? Thank goodness...."

Thankfully, Shizuku was not the type to sink into despair or pessimism. Seeing Tatsuya give an energetic nod, she sighed in relief.

This type of conversation could only be achieved through video calls.

"I see, so that's why Tatsuya-kun wants to know about anything related to this."

Tatsuya once again gave the affirmative to Shizuku's words that were not phrased as a question.

"However, that doesn't mean you have to investigate too much."

Before all that, he absolutely had to remind her about this.

"If you could tell me anything you are aware of, that would be more than enough."

"But you believe there are clues in America, right?"

"More like hunting for clues. To be honest, I believe that the perpetrator of the vampire incident came from America."

Shizuku was not the only one to betray her astonishment.

He hadn't even informed Honoka or even Miyuki about this leap in logic.

"That's why I don't want you to do anything dangerous, Shizuku. Definitely avoid doing anything that would put you at risk. Information from your end is not absolutely critical."

"...Got it, I won't act rashly. So, please wait for me without any high expectations."

"I wanted to ask just in case, you are telling me not to have high hopes about collecting information and not about doing anything reckless, did I get that correct?"

"Of course."

Though Shizuku was neither an idiot nor a bumbling fool, he still didn't feel completely at ease even after reminding her one more time.

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Based on Erika's knowledge, currently there were three organized groups taking action against the serial vampire incidents in the city.

The first group was headed by the police, with the police department's special investigative unit (basically the Japanese version of the FBI) leading various public safety divisions on the hunt.

The second investigative group consisted of members from the Ten Master Clans, with the Saegusa Family leading the way and the Juumonji Family right behind them. They had the backing of the Internal Affairs (Cabinet Department of Information Control) and assisted the police in a half official, half civilian role. The only difference was that, contrary to normal, the "civilian" half held the advantage.

The third group was the private vigilante team assembled by the Chiba Family with the famous authority on Ancient Magic, the Yoshida Family, in support.

In short, this was Erika's group.

"Wouldn't it be better if we joined forces with our senpais...?"

The nature of the request from the Chiba Family to the Yoshida Family might not be official business, but the request for aid itself was completely by the book. In response, Mikihiko was immediately appointed as a liaison, to which he voiced the same question that he asked for at least the 10th time since yesterday.

Needless to say, the target for his words was his partner in this operation, Erika.

"I believe that we would be much more efficient if we had access to the Anti-Crime System provided by the street cameras."

"No worries. Even the police, who have the greatest access to the surveillance systems, have yet to sniff out a trail."

"Then in terms of manpower, I think that cooperating would be much better than trying to solo this."

"Which is why I asked you for help, right?"

"No, not just the two of us...."

Mikihiko gave up trying to convince the rapidly advancing Erika and quickly sprinted to catch up until he was standing shoulder to shoulder with her.

"We won't find anything by just meandering around pointlessly...."

He was talking to himself, but also grumbling at the same time. This wasn't a volume that Erika could hear, but she would probably ignore this even if she heard him. If pressed for a reason, this was the real reason why Mikihiko was selected as Erika's companion.

The Yoshida Family was a clan that passed on Ancient Magic in the Shinto style. While not completely the same as families specializing as Onmyoshi, their combat prowess was still outstanding. Originally, this country traditionally allowed easy access to techniques among religious groups. Based on the fact that a Shinto style group was using talismans as a medium, they were not a stickler for the rules.

After hearing from Toshikazu that a scientific approach to the investigation yielded little results, the commanding officer from the Chiba Family (Toshikazu and Erika's father), decided to rely on the skills that Ancient Magic users excelled in and formally requested cooperation from the head of the Yoshida Family, which was their closest friend among the Ancient

Magic families. Since the head of the Chiba Family was a "mysterious eccentric" who personally believed that he was "useless without magic abilities", he probably felt that "the occult could only be combatted with supernatural powers".

Based on that, Mikihiko wasn't accompanying Erika as a guide, but as a "fortune teller".

"Miki, which way?"

Coming to a stop at the intersection, Erika turned her head to ask.

I really wish you could be a little more polite, Mikihiko mentally sighed to himself as he placed the less than meter long, more like three feet long, wooden staff on the road. As a side note, after Lina decided to jump on the bandwagon for "Miki", he officially gave up trying to change it.

Rather than calling it a wooden staff, it was more like a thin, long wooden cane covered in tiny characters written in black ink. The tip of the cane was almost perfectly round.

He put a hand on one end to make sure it stood straight and then lightly removed his hand.

While it was perpendicular to the ground, the ground beneath was pavement, so a simple wooden cane would not be able to pierce through.

Yet, without any supporting struts, Mikihiko's wooden cane was standing upright on the ground.

Mikihiko fell back three steps and swiftly turned around. The moment his body turned around, the wooden cane lost its unseen support and clattered to the ground.

With a sorrowful sound, it rolled across the ground and finally pointed towards the right of the intersection.

"This way...."

Erika walked in the direction that the cane pointed in. Forget waiting for her companion, she didn't even bother to turn her head.

Mikihiko chuckled wryly and picked up his cane before hurrying after Erika. Just before catching up to her, he suddenly seemed to recall something and pulled out an information terminal from his inside pocket. The terminal

was set on broadcast. After verifying that the terminal was still broadcasting his position to the information network that he registered at beforehand, he put it back into his pocket.

The wry grin vanished from Mikihiko's face. He had a premonition that they were getting closer to their target.

He slowed down after closing to one step behind Erika and pulled out the terminal again while maintaining the same distance.

He called out a list of location names. After dragging another new entry into the list, Mikihiko replaced his terminal and walked alongside Erika as they advanced.

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He wore a large overcoat and a hat pulled down by the brim. Beneath the hat, there was a gray cloth with a pattern of black bats that covered the entire face. Charles Sullivan, he who had been bestowed the name of Demus Second with Stars, was currently using all of his strength to flee for his life.

However, no matter how he tried, he could not escape the pursuit. The hunter chasing him was not from Stardust, but an executioner bearing the name of the brightest star in the night sky.

A Magician with flaming red hair and golden eyes chased after Sullivan. After transforming into Angie Sirius, Lina had already been immersed in psion noise several times. Every time, she felt that she was going to lose Sullivan's trail,

"High Commander, take the next right."

But Sullivan's location was completely locked on by the psion radar that was emanating from the mobile base disguised as a news van. In this regard, the USNA was a step ahead of Japan. With a radar that could identify psion wave signatures, it was practically impossible to escape from within the radar's sensitivity range. Furthermore, so long as Lina had that miniature, hand held radar signal broadcaster, fleeing out of radar range was out of the question.

"Clara, Rachel, switch to Sullivan's forefront."

Lina called out into her transmitter. Clara and Rachel were the nicknames for Hunter Q and R, respectively. Lina, who hated referring to people as letters, was the one who gave them those names, as they were not their true names. Of course, "Clara" was spelled with a "C" and not a "Q", but Lina didn't really care since they were only nicknames.

Twenty to thirty meters ahead, the aura of magic combat intensified. The two of them were currently stalling Sullivan's progress. For Lina, this was the simple matter of a single step. She was now completely in control of Sullivan's position.

Despite the late hour, the streets were not entirely void of people. Still, this failed to warrant any concern when they were engaged in pursuit that rivaled the speed of a motorcycle. Completely ignoring the possibility of police intervention, Lina pulled out a small blade – a dagger.

Maybe it was because their movements were too fast, but the scattered pedestrians failed to take notice of the dagger. Also, the non-reflective dark coloring would have been inconspicuous even in broad daylight. Without bothering to hide her intention, Lina threw the dagger forward.

This dagger was a Weaponized Integrated CAD. Just the act of throwing was enough to activate Move-Type Magic, allowing the user to manipulate its thrown trajectory towards the target. The dagger Lina hurled changed directions several times in the air before flying towards Sullivan's back.

An instant before the dagger began its flight, Sullivan was aware that even a vampire's physical ability wasn't enough to dodge the dagger in time. However, if it was himself with his mental powers restored, then he should be able to cast Trajectory Alteration in time.

With this in mind, Sullivan concentrated on the dagger and willed it to fly towards one of the hunters closing in on his turned back. Friendly fire indeed, Sullivan thought mentally. Now, the dagger en route should have altered its flight path towards the hunter's back.

A soundless scream of terror slipped from Sullivan's lips.

His Trajectory Alteration ability completely failed to affect Lina's Move-Type Magic.

The difference in interference strength was simply too great.

Knowing that his ability was ineffective, Sullivan hurriedly raised his right arm, where Lina's dagger sank deeply upon impact.

Sullivan's body stiffened.

His back was slashed to ribbons by R's combat knife.

Those would have been fatal injuries on a normal person.

Yet Sullivan swept his arms around and sent R and her combat knife flying.

At this time, the masked Magician appeared. Those golden pupils peeking out from behind the mask beheld Sullivan's eyes.

Lina halted and unholstered a pistol.

All of a sudden, the shadows in the street released an electrical attack towards Lina.

Q, R, and Lina were completely unable to detect this surprise attack before it sprang.

Nonetheless, the electric shock merely gave off a flash and faded away before coming into contact with Lina's body.

Lina had activated Wide Area Disruption on reflex and nullified the vampire's magic.

During this time, Lina's arm remained in its aiming position.

The muzzle was directly pointed at Sullivan's heart.

Lina's finger tightened on the trigger.

The bullet, reinforced by Data Fortification, ignored every semblance of defense and destroyed Sullivan's heart.

Lina did not dwell on this success for very long and began moving again.

Her eyes were locked onto the gradually disappearing image of the vampire who released the electric attack.

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Afterwards, they used divination to point the way two more times. After walking for approximately ten minutes, the two of them heard the light sound of running footsteps. They were the sounds of rubber heeled shoes, with one set of footsteps fleeing and the other steps in pursuit.

One of them was probably a runaway, the other likely the pursuer.

The two of them exchanged a glance.

Then, without exchanging any further signal, the two of them rushed out.

With different methods, they had arrived at the same conclusion.

—They found it.

Erika was slightly ahead, with Mikihiko right on her heels.

As she ran, Erika reached into the thin, long box she wore over her back and pulled out a naked sword that was not sheathed. As a replacement for the blade, the entire body of the sword was covered in engravings, given that it was a weapon forged by the Isori Family. This was a gift from Isori Kei to Erika as a replacement for the overly conspicuous Orochimaru. While unable to achieve the same power as Orochimaru, it was still equipped with the ability to execute Inertia Cancel.

On the other side, Mikihiko held a wooden cane in his right hand while his left, about two fist lengths away from his right, was quickly flung outwards. Shooting out of his sleeve, a fan like object was now clasped in his left hand.

The object that appeared to be an iron fan contained thin, paper-like strips of metal linked together at a single point. Each strip of metal was covered in engravings of various incantations and formations. These strips combined to form the iron fan that was the conduit for psions favored by practitioners. The tassel extending from the fan went all the way into the sleeve, where it was connected to the device containing the Activation Sequence that replaced any need for incantation.

This was also a type of CAD. Based on Tatsuya's suggestion and Mikihiko's own ideas, this new type of Ancient Magic supplemental CAD was designed to streamline the process where Ancient Magic utilized both incantations and talismans.

The two of them prepared for immediate combat and closed in on the footsteps. Occasionally, their rhythm was greatly disrupted because both of them were prepared for battle.

Even considering this, Erika's and Mikihiko's pace was still faster. Taking a shortcut along the small alley between the neat row of buildings and entering the small park used for evacuation purposes (actually, more like

the temporary evacuation location during disasters), the two of them finally caught sight of their target.

There were two humanoid figures clashing against one another. One wore a large overcoat and a hat to obscure any hint of facial and physical features and the other wore a mask to cover everything around the eyes.

Both of them appeared to be feminine.

"Miki, you take care of the one in the coat. I'll handle the one in the mask!"

Based on Leo's testimony, the one in the coat and hat was more likely, but someone walking around in the dark of night and wearing a mask to hide their features was also highly suspicious. Most importantly, even from afar, the large blade in the woman's hand as well as her expert handling of said weapon caused Erika's sense of wariness to spike.

Without resorting to Personal-Acceleration Magic and only relying on the Engraving Magic that increased the blade's strength, Erika slashed towards the masked woman. Even though magic was not used to accelerate the blade, this was still a degree of speed that was extremely difficult to avoid on physical abilities alone except by a small portion of people who were masters in martial arts.

That woman's handling of the blade was certainly first rate, but not high enough to be rated as a master.

Hence even if she was able to take one of Erika's blows, there should have been no way for her to dodge it. –If she was just a normal human being, that is.

A flash of light.

Erika's blade touched nothing but air while her target had already moved three meters away from her.

The light wasn't a physical manifestation, but the psion light that accompanied the activation of magic. After taking notice of that, Erika was entirely unfazed that her attack had been dodged.

The only detail worthy of shock was the magic's speed.

Erika was confident that her opponent had not detected her attack until the instant before the blow was struck. In short, during the short instant when

she raised her sword and struck, her opponent was able to select a magical response, activate it, and successfully avoid the attack.

The masked Magician shifted to a spot directly beneath the street lamp. There was no way to tell, nor was there a need to, whether the person in question actually cared that someone witnessed her presence.

That picture was deeply engraved in Erika's eyes and consciousness.

What drew her attention was not the alluring feminine features that mocked the mask's ability to hide them, nor the well-toned physical body that could be seen in spite of the heavy clothing, but the color of her hair that was illuminated by the street lights. It was a color that one could not associate with human beings, an unholy color.

Dark enough to mistake as black, a hair of the darkest red.

Along with the golden pupils that seemed to draw one in, peeking through the gaps of the mask.

"—Attacking!"

Her swordsmanship training activated as if on reflex and broke free from that draw. Erika rallied and broadened her vision, taking the entire body of the masked Magician into view. Erika reduced the preparation work down to a minimum and sprinted towards that woman.

She chose not to use any Reinforcement Magic. Against this type of opponent, magical assistance would only achieve the opposite effect, so she relied on her instincts and ability to read her opponent.

Without using magic, Erika used a speed that was positively magic-like to close in on that woman.

On the masked Magician's side, traces of wavering could be seen.

Without any hesitation, Erika raised her sword.

The masked Magician released another magic light. This wasn't Personal Acceleration Magic, but a Personal Move-Type Magic.

Erika didn't have the ability to identify the Magic Sequence in an instant.

In comparison, Erika possessed a set of piercing eyes that belonged to a trained swordsman.

Without waiting for her opponent to finish the motion, she had already determined the direction of movement in that same instant and altered the path of her sword.

Her sword swung hard in the reverse direction and passed over the dark crimson hair of the strange woman who was directly beneath the direction of the swing.

She activated the Inertia Cancel Ability and reined in her swing.

The masked woman maintained her crouching position and leaped horizontally.

Erika forcibly halted her pursuing footsteps.

Right before her, a dagger hit the ground.

Taking advantage of Erika's inactivity, the masked woman rose from one knee.

The dark red tresses fluctuated wildly.

Erika's sword without a blade had sheared through the head band holding back the masked woman's hair based on speed alone.

The scattered strands were chest length. The light wind caused her hair to flutter, giving an altogether unholy vibe to her appearance.

(If her skin is also black, she would be like Kali, huh....)

After briefly considering this, Erika kept her guard up as she carefully examined her stalemated opponent. Her appearance might seem like a joke, but her skills were unquestionably first class. As for her magical skill, right now, that earlier performance in that solitary instant was enough to rate her beyond first class. Erika's competitive spirit told her that at this current rate, she would lose the initiative and be forced onto the defensive, culminating in a crushing defeat that was beyond imagining.

Overlooking any opportunity could be fatal.

Fortunately, the masked woman appeared to be quite distracted. Even with this tense standoff with Erika, her ultimate attention was still directed towards the cloaked "vampire".

The woman was acting on her own, whereas Erika and Mikihiko moved as a team.

Erika concluded that there was an opportunity to exploit in there.

The masked woman and young swordswoman watched each other.

Behind Erika, a roar of thunder could be heard.

The golden pupils flicked away from Erika.

In that instant, Erika swung her blade forward.

Behind him came the sound of rushing wind.

Mikihiko perfectly understood how capable Erika's techniques were. Even though he was not formally trained in swordsmanship, Ancient Magic and traditional martial arts were deeply entwined to the point that it was almost general knowledge.

Within the Chiba Family, it was not an exaggeration to say that Erika's abilities were second only to her father and older brothers. However, in terms of pure swordsmanship, she had already surpassed her father's technique and was hot in pursuit of her genius second brother.

And versus Erika's slash, her opponent dodged that attack instead of taking the blow. Based on this alone, the opponent Erika was up against was no random scrub. However—

(...The one over here isn't a pushover either.)

There was no chance for him to offer any aid.

The opponent that squared off against him was just as Leo had described: hat worn low, white cloth mask, long overcoat.

She was not holding a weapon, though she might be concealing one.

Still, this was enough to constitute a threat.

Leo's body had not contained any blatant injuries save for ordinary bruises. There were no signs of lacerations or burns. In other words, Mikihiko believed that his opponent didn't utilize fire, thunder, or blades against Leo during their conflict.

Any weapon involved would have to be a blunt, bludgeoning tool.

Otherwise, she may have resorted to her fists.

Up until now, the angles of attack were within their predicted parameters.

That being said, if anything did escape their notice, it would have to be the enemy's outlandish speed and strength.

Restricted to Fortification Magic, Leo was a first class practitioner.

The female vampire – Mikihiko assigned his opponent a gender for simplicity's sake – swung her fist towards Mikihiko. The heavy gloves worn over the hands prevented her from inflicting any external injuries, but in recompense, they could provide telling blows on an opponent's internal organs.

As expected, Mikihiko extended his iron fan (shaped CAD) and tapped on of the metal strips with a finger.

(Wataboshi.)

Soundlessly incanting the spell, the activated psions were passed along his fingertip and activated the spell.

The demon fist was accompanied by rushing wind. Even through the overcoat, that slender wrist contained unimaginable power and possessed almost sonic speed.

Although Mikihiko had obtained superior physical abilities thanks to intense training, there was still no way he could avoid a blow traveling at the speed of sound within that time frame.

—A block of compressed air rushed towards Mikihiko before the physical blow arrived.

—Caught along the wind, Mikihiko's body lightly floated away.

He avoided the fist's trajectory by moving with the air flow. Immediately following on the heels of the air flow, the punch closed in. This was the application of the Ancient Magic concept "Riding the Wind" by combining gravity nullification and inertia cancel into phenomena alteration.

Mikihiko moved to his opponent's flank and at the same time he touched down because the effect vanished, he swung the cane he held in his right hand at his enemy's outstretched right wrist, taking aim at the joint.

Originally intended to shatter the wrist with the downward blow, the cane snapped in two with a clean break.

He subconsciously felt the numbness traveling along the cane back to his hand while the other half prompted him to let go of the broken staff.

("Barrier"? Or is this "Withering"?)

Mikihiko proactively leaped backwards to avoid the scything karate chop, and immediately pulled out a throwing dagger from his hidden pocket. He hurtled what could only be called a tiny throwing blade at his opponent's outstretched wrist.

Unfortunately, the small blade only poked a hole in the overcoat and failed to pierce any further before bouncing back.

("Barrier", eh!)

There wasn't any sign of magic activation in response to the thrown dagger, which meant that his opponent normally surrounded herself with a projectile repellant field. Mikihiko's analysis led him to believe that the uncommon power behind those punches and slashes was probably also tied to this barrier.

(In that case....)

He moved his finger and opened the first metal strip that was previously sealed.

At the most easily accessible slot, he had prepared the most complex spell.

Within Mikihiko's knowledge, there was no magic technique complex enough to create a barrier that blocked both physical matter and magical energy.

Although the chance that there were multiple barriers involved was definitely not zero, it was still worthy of putting it to the test.

("Thunder Child".)

Thunder Child – or more traditionally known as "Thunder Spawn", was a magic that recreated a small scale thunderbolt in a small space. This was only an inferior imitation of the true magic that actually manipulated the clouds, "Thunder Cloud", but its discharge and voltage were just as powerful.

A roar of destruction resounded through the sky and sped over the sky to the other end where it lay over the head of the vampire and released the electricity. The instant the magic activated, a hit was already predetermined. Electricity homed in on the vampire's head at 200 million meters per second.

The ensuing sound could only be described as a beast yowling in pain as if it was being torn like a fabric. However, the voice was swiftly changed to a more fitting roar. The light that permeated the target after the strike was transferred to the hands of the female vampire as she held her head. Her fingertips cackled with sound and released sparks. There, electricity in excess amounts of what Mikihiko produced was being gathered.

(Dispersion-Type Magic!)

Extracting electrons from within an object was one of the techniques in the Four Major Types and Eight Systems and was a fundamental technique in Dispersion-Type Magic. Since part of the electron's "phenomena" was replaced, Dispersion-Type Magic was able to channel higher amounts of electricity compared to electric abilities from Ancient Magic.

The electricity ran amok as it tried to hit Mikihiko as he rolled back to avoid the blow.

When comparing Dispersion-Type Magic from modern magic with electric magic from Ancient Magic, the power of the former was greater at the cost of less control. Mikihiko was only able to avoid the first blow thanks to this. Still, when literally faced with a power that moved at the speed of electricity at this range, Mikihiko wasn't confident that he could keep dodging forever.

Mikihiko regretted his unconscious error at leaving one aspect of his opponent's attack unaccounted for as he started designing defensive magic. Mikihiko wasn't trying to match her power and merely tried to create a dense block of air as a magic shield.

However, this was a state where his opponent had already cast magic. Somehow, she managed to cast magic without resorting to Activation Sequences and there was no sign of the spell's weakening.

In short, this was true magic.

There's no time—.

Mikihiko had already come to grips with his hopeless situation, but that doomed future did not come to pass.

—It was as if a storm had extinguished a candle flame.

—A shot of psion information body vanished along with the electricity in the vampire's hand.

The masked woman raised her left arm to block Erika's downward swinging sword.

Accompanied by a dull sound, the impact failed to give an impression of a bone fracture or shredding through the flesh. There was probably a lightweight composite metal or cushion body armor – something like a bracer involved.

Even if there wasn't a killing intent involved, Erika didn't show any mercy.

Her opponent held a gun in her right hand. Even if her opponent's mask was hilarious, she had undergone rigorous training as combat personnel and not merely as a Magician. –Wariness permeated every inch of Erika's consciousness as she willed her body to squeeze out an extra ounce of power.

The bracer that drew closer to the chin dipped – only because the downward striking blade had been retracted.

Before the wrist holding the gun could be raised, Erika shifted to her opponent's left flank.

Half a beat before the raised gun could be aimed, Erika had already struck the gun.

Thanks to the suppressive nature of the silencer, the gunshot was very light.

The masked woman reached out with her left hand towards Erika's face.

She formed a circle with her thumb and middle finger.

Before her open hand, a small ball of electricity danced around.

Erika automatically activated Personal Acceleration Magic.

Her body achieved a degree of motion that surpassed common sense.

Retreating to avoid the electric ball, Erika lunged for the Magician's eyes before the muzzle could be pointed at her.

Got her, Erika thought.

Just as this thought crossed her mind and as Erika stepped within striking distance of her sword,

She was knocked aside by a sudden force that rose from feet level and was only conscious of what had happened in the next moment.

The shock caused her consciousness to loosen her grasp on the sword for only a brief second.

Erika immediately recovered her footing.

However, her opponent failed to take advantage of the opening for a follow up attack.

The masked Magician pressed her right shoulder with her left hand. Maybe it was Acceleration-Type or Move-Type Magic, but before she was blown away by her opponent, Erika managed to connect a vicious blow with her bladeless sword against her enemy's right shoulder. The masked Magician kept a hand on her shoulder while she gazed in the direction of Mikihiko and the vampire's ongoing brawl.

To be precise, she was looking even further. She was watching a young man riding atop a motorcycle with a silver CAD pointed at the vampire.

The youngster's face was obscured by the helmet, so his features could not be identified.

(Tatsuya-kun...?)

In spite of this, even barely keeping a weak grasp on her consciousness as she maintained a combat stance, Erika clearly beheld with her eyes the form of her classmate beneath the street lights.

Erika, Mikihiko, and the vampire.

Taking in the sight of friend and foe intermixed with one another, Tatsuya looked towards the masked Magician as if drawn by those golden pupils of hers.

The masked Magician raised her left hand at Tatsuya. Like a seal, the premonition of magic invocation was already at her fingertips in an instant.

However, that premonition faded away as the world was being overwritten.

Those golden pupils were greatly shaken.

Three times she attempted to activate different sorts of magic, and three times they were blown away.

Everyone heard an "Ah". The one who called out was Mikihiko, and there was no need to state the reason.

The vampire was fleeing.

Hidden beneath the visor, Tatsuya's gaze drifted from the masked Magician.

Only for the briefest of instants.

The masked Magician was not going to let that instant pass by.

The next technique wasn't magic.

Even if his gaze was averted, so long as it was magic, nothing could escape Tatsuya's "vision".

In other words, the masked Magician also noticed that detail.

The swaying right hand that held the gun pointed downward spat out a bullet.

Aimed around her feet, sparks flew and immediately turned into flashes.

The dull sound of gunshots resounded five times, until the masked Magician was entirely obscured by the flashes.

Tatsuya directed his magic at the masked Magician's body.

He aimed at her legs and attempted to use Decomposition Magic – or at least that was the plan.

The information body that should have depicted the actual physical form only contained surface data and no actual content.

While there were records of color and outer appearance, there was no related information on mass, physical design, or chemical composition.

Tatsuya suspended his magic and lowered his arm.

After the flashes faded from the park, there was no sign of the masked Magician or the vampire.

"Are the two of you alright?"

Abandoning the pursuit, Tatsuya climbed off the motorcycle and removed his helmet before checking on the others' situation.

Mikihiko appeared to have been spared any physical injuries.

Erika on the other hand....

"...I'm getting a little embarrassed at the stares."

"Ah, sorry."

Copying the example set before him with Mikihiko blushing and turning around, Tatsuya followed suit.

This was not to say that there was much in the way of revealed flesh. The protective undergarments appeared to be undamaged. It's just that there were cuts and tears all along the clothes and near the chest area and there were hints of her curves showing.

Just like an overly excited rock band on stage.

This alone would hardly qualify as indecorous, since this was comparable to wearing a swimsuit on the beach or while swimming, but wearing this on the street would probably be a little embarrassing.

"...Hey, can you lend me a coat or something?"

Way to show off your caring side. As if hearing someone say this, Mikihiko frantically took off his short jacket and threw it over to Erika's side. (Tatsuya was wearing a shoulder holster under his coat, so he wasn't able to do so.)

"Thanks, I'm good now."

She wasn't in the nude, nor was she anywhere close to semi-nude. "Too exaggerated" was Tatsuya's undisguised feelings on the matter, but perhaps this was another sense of aesthetics. In the end, this was far better than being completely brazen or lacking in shame.

"Erika, are you hurt?"

She seemed fine based on what he could see, but he still wanted to ask her to be sure.

"Thankfully I wore under armor. Otherwise, I'd be in serious trouble."

The phrase under armor was certainly out of date, though Tatsuya wasn't sure if it was a blessing or a curse that he knew "under armor" referred to something else. Rather than the heavy gear worn beneath armor that served as protection against impact and skin lacerations, the "under armor" that Erika referred to was a set of underwear made of synthetic rubber that possessed multiple qualities like being bulletproof and slashing resistance. Unlike heavy Kevlar, there were advantages like a minimal restriction on movement as well as remaining inconspicuous even when worn beneath regular clothing. On the other hand, strictly from a material perspective, the form fitting design was not popular among those who wished to hide their physical features. Normally, this wouldn't be an issue with other clothes on top, but this time, the suit posed a hazard to any accompanying eyes rather than the person in question.

"There appeared to be Kamaitachi mixed in with the gust."

"I believe you're correct. Seriously...that accursed mask. She's going to pay for my clothes next time we meet."

"Still, your opponent's collar bone appeared to be causing her great pain."

"This is this. That is that."

As Tatsuya said, Erika was not solely on the receiving end and had managed to get in a vengeful strike of her own. Though the blow was slightly shallow, Erika's blade definitely made contact with the masked Magician's right shoulder before she was blown away by the gust.

Even if Tatsuya had not personally witnessed the occurrence, he still would have accurately deduced the proceedings based on the masked Magician's appearance as well as the extent of damage done to Erika's clothes.

"Now that you mention it, Tatsuya-kun, why are you here?"

Given the look on her face, this was a question that Erika was burning to ask from the very beginning rather than something she just happened to stumble upon. As for how to answer that, Tatsuya pondered several different angles before finally settling on the direct answer. –Largely because this was the more interesting one.

"Why are you asking me? Obviously because I received Mikihiko's message."

Mikihiko's face fell, and he sent a "You traitor" look at Tatsuya.

"Hm~~"

However, in the face of that level of displeasure, Mikihiko reluctantly turned his eyes back to Erika.

"So that's how you were able to make it in the nick of time. Nice work, Miki."

The phrase was complimentary on the surface, and this was a situation where congratulations were in order.

Obviously, the only responses Mikihiko could muster under that context were "Ah" and "That".

No matter how he heard it, the voice that wiggled into his ears failed to sound positive.

"Speaking of which, when exactly did you make contact? I, don't think I was ever aware of this."

"....."

Of course she never heard about this, since they never told Erika in the first place. Having Tatsuya follow their signal was entirely Mikihiko's independent decision. Naturally, he also had to report all their findings to Tatsuya. Upon reflection, even Mikihiko himself would be hard pressed to explain how he arrived at this conclusion.

Under Erika's cold gaze, cold sweat rolled down Mikihiko's brow.

This was exactly like "a frog frozen under the eyes of a serpent". It looked like he was unable to extract himself by his own power, Tatsuya concluded with a mental "That's far enough".

"Guys, I apologize for barging in on your conversation, but shouldn't we relocate?"

Hearing another voice break into the conversation, Erika blinked twice and reluctantly pulled out a mostly undamaged information terminal.

"I believe people are converging here?"

At Tatsuya's hint, Mikihiko frantically removed his own information terminal.

Erika verified the time. Almost five minutes had elapsed since they made contact with the vampire and masked Magician. The other groups would probably arrive shortly.

Mikihiko unfolded the pursuit display. The bright lights indicating allied investigators were advancing along irregular lines, a clear indication that they were definitely not acting in concert with the other investigating teams.

"You don't have approval from the Clan Meeting, do you?"

While they were not part of the investigative team led by the Saegusa Family, they haven't acted on anything worthy of punishment.

Still, if at all possible, it was worthwhile to avoid notifying the Saegusa and Juumonji Family's investigative team that they had engaged in combat within their jurisdiction. This could prove to be especially troublesome if they ran afoul of the previous Student Council President.

While the two of them agonized over this, Tatsuya was preparing to evacuate without a care in the world.

"Erika, need a ride?"

Once again boarding his motorcycle, Tatsuya asked aloud,

"Sure, thanks."

To which Erika jumped onto the backseat and wrapped her arms snugly around Tatsuya's waist.

"Tatsuya, what about me?"

"Sorry, over capacity."

In response to Mikihiko's agitated question, Tatsuya flipped the engine switch.

"You'll get fined for riding without a helmet!"

Hearing the shout from behind him intermixed with frustration (and not a small amount of unwillingness to admit defeat), Tatsuya sped off on the motorcycle. (Speaking of which, the fine for not wearing a helmet no longer existed in the 21st century. Instead, the driver could be charged with vehicular manslaughter depending on the extent of the passengers' injuries.)

After losing his jacket and being left behind, Mikihiko could only stand there blankly for the moment.

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After returning to the mobile base that was disguised as a news van, Angie Sirius – or Lina's current form, gave the order to retreat even before she took a seat.

No one questioned her orders because this was the expected action. The moment she sat down, the mobile base soundlessly began to move. Still, the interior of the vehicle was filled with confusion, an almost "I want to ask but am too afraid to speak up" type of atmosphere. The ruin of her hair and the dirtied boots caused by the flash practically screamed that she "fled

back". Nonetheless, the word "flee" was simply incompatible with the High Commander of Stars, "Sirius".

"Major."

The interior possessed enough height to constitute a ceiling, but in spite of this, the two other members still bent at the waist in front of Lina.

"We are terribly sorry."

The reason the two of them were apologizing was because they fell behind during the pursuit. Lina engaged the vampire on her own because her two companions were unable to keep up with her speed.

"Don't worry. Although a third party interfered, I bear the responsibility for letting the target get away."

"...Thank you very much."

"In addition, we successfully carried out Sergeant Sullivan's punishment, so we can't chalk this up as a complete failure. Have we recovered the Sergeant's corpse?"

"Recovery confirmed."

"Is that so?"

Hearing the voice from behind the two before her, Lina relaxed and nodded her head.

"Immediately perform autopsy on the Sergeant's corpse. Also, were you able to identify the other one I was pursuing?"

However, she immediately tightened her expression and asked the next question.

"I am very sorry. Although we were able to record a psion wave signature, there are currently no matches in our database."

"So it's not a deserter.... Otherwise, the psion wave signature may have changed."

"I'm afraid it's probably the latter."

"Understood. Continue the pursuit based on the recorded psion wave signature."

"Yes, ma'am."

Upon hearing this response, Lina ordered the two before her to return to their seats and leaned back into her chair.

Lina pressed a hand to her right shoulder and cast Healing-Type Magic on herself. Fortunately, she was able to keep a stoic expression in front of her subordinates thanks to her magical disguise, but she had fired a gun while her collarbone was cracked, causing a full blown fracture that was painful enough to almost reduce her to tears.

(How come I never heard that Erika was so strong!? And Tatsuya used some sort of mysterious ability to completely nullify my technique.... What the hell is up with Japanese high school students these days!?)

Completely ignoring her own age, Lina complained bitterly in the privacy of her own mind.

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"Huh? From Oba-sama?"

After sweeping a glance over her older brother, who had hurriedly left the house after glancing at the information terminal from his pocket and just returned while explaining the situation, Miyuki couldn't help but ask this question.

Immediately after the question, she flushed in embarrassment after realizing her improper behavior.

Still, Tatsuya felt that her question was only a natural course of events, so he wasn't going to chide his sister over such a minor detail.

"There's something I wish to discuss with Oba-ue."

In other words, could you please call her for me, was Tatsuya's request to Miyuki.

The majority of those working for the Yotsuba Family were aware that Tatsuya was Maya's nephew. At the same time, they also knew that Tatsuya served as nothing more than a tool. –Except, only a select minority had access to the information that he was being utilized as a weapon. In

light of this, even if Tatsuya reached out to his aunt via phone, the call would inevitably be curtailed.

In other words, forget Tatsuya, not even Miyuki knew the number for the direct line. The information control surrounding the Yotsuba Family was several times more intense than the government, and that was no idle exaggeration by those in the know.

"So long as Onii-sama says so.... Can you give me a minute?"

"Ah...I'll go change as well."

Even though they were related by blood, they couldn't wear casual clothes, and doing something like cutting off the screen was unthinkable. That was the type of existence that their aunt (and other family members) was.

"I apologize for calling you so late."

"That's fine. Compared to that, it's quite rare for Miyuki to call me by phone."

As usual, Maya appeared on the screen of the video call with her customary, age-defying beauty and mysterious smile. Hayama stood by her side, dressed neatly in a three piece suit. While Tatsuya pondered the oddity of having Hayama attend a family call, Tatsuya was also standing next to Miyuki in a black suit, so they were probably about the same.

After the usual customary words of welcome that carefully masked the mounting agitation, Miyuki used an objective tone – a definite chore for her in this case – to convey the highlights of Tatsuya's message.

"Tatsuya too? This is also something rare."

Choosing to forgo any attempt to hide her interest, Maya allowed Tatsuya to speak.

"Oba-ue, there's actually one thing I would like to ask you and another I would like to request."

"Go ahead."

Maya nodded, in an excellent mood. Well, judging from her appearance, at least.

"In that case, allow me to go right ahead...Oba-ue, can you please tell me how the Kudou Family's Counter Magic 'Parade' works?"

Next to Tatsuya, Miyuki emitted a small sound while shock suffused her face.

On the screen, Hayama raised one eyebrow significantly.

Unable to mask her expression, Maya burst into laughter.

"Come now...Tatsuya, 'Parade' is one of the Kudou Family's closest guarded secrets. Did you think I would know this secret?"

Amid her laughter, Maya deflected the question.

"Oba-ue once learned from Elder Kudou directly. Even if you do not know the Magic Sequence, I'm sure you at least know the ins and outs, correct?"

After establishing that "she couldn't teach him", Tatsuya continued pushing with his own question.

"Counter Magic 'Parade' applies Data Fortification on your own Eidos and rewrites or alters your appearance. To be precise, it is a Magic Sequence that applies a different appearance or a fake mask on the Eidos and creates a false appearance, using the new appearance to mask the original in order to protect the real form from hostile magical effects, correct?"

Not only was he pushing on, he also supplied his own hypothesis.

"...'Alteration' Magic is something that cannot be achieved in the real world, but I think you are already aware of that, no?"

Maya responded directly to Tatsuya's hypothesis. Just this alone was sufficient to inform Tatsuya regarding the truth of his words, but this wasn't enough to satisfy Tatsuya.

"Rather than using 'Alteration', a simple adjust at the visual level using Light Refraction Magic would be enough. The problem lies in that Light Refraction Magic cannot escape my 'eye', hence where the issue lies."

"Onii-sama, that...."

The one who responded verbally while looking completely astounded was Miyuki.

"I can't believe that there's an opponent who cannot be identified by Onii-sama...."

"Not only that, they also avoided Mist Dispersal."

Pale faced, Miyuki was struck dumb.

As if she also received a blow, Maya wrinkled her brows in an instant on the other side of the screen.

Though she swiftly recovered her smiling visage, the tangent in the conversation had been dispelled.

"If Mist Dispersal is useless, then Trident should have no problem."

"Can Parade be cast on top of itself?"

At Maya's suggestion, Tatsuya once more ventured another question. Yet, Maya's response referred to a wholly unrelated topic.

"By my recollection, when it came to Parade, it was sensei's younger brother who was more adept at Parade than sensei himself."

"Thank you very much. Oba-ue, it appears that I will be unable to handle this incident alone. Here, I formally request for reinforcements."

"Is that the request you would like me to grant?"

Across the screen, aunt and nephew caught each other's eye.

"...Very well. It is true that things have progressed far beyond our initial estimates.

I will allow you to make contact with Major Kazama."

Tatsuya bowed and retreated out of the video screen.

Chapter 7

It was another morning, and another school day. Tatsuya exited the station with Miyuki and the two of them went to meet up with their friends, then go on their way to school. One had left earlier in the year, and last week yet another had gone, but besides that it was the same as since spring.

This morning, however, something different awaited Tatsuya. Before they could find their friends, the voice of a senior called out from the ticket gate. Both Tatsuya and Miyuki had already been aware of her presence before she had called out.

At this time, most of the people using the station were students of First High and associated persons. Unlike with the mass transit trains of old, it is now uncommon to see large crowds of passengers at the station all at the same time. Nonetheless, in order to get out of the way of the students arriving moment by moment, the siblings walked over to where Mayumi stood by the wall.

More than a few students flickered glances their way, but none of them were overly concerned. There was nothing particularly wondrous about the previous Student Council President and the current Vice-President conversing, and that the brother of the VP was a favourite with the previous Prez —from a gossip point of view anyway— was a well known fact in First High.

In truth, there wasn't even a conversation. Without linking up and walking to school together, Tatsuya and Miyuki went through the ticket gate. Mayumi had uttered only one line: "After school, come to the second cross-field club room."

The cross-field club (a club for magic combat survival games) was a club Katsuto had once been a member of. Their second club room implicitly served as an informal meeting place, and amongst those in the know, it was an open secret that Katsuto continued to use this room privately after he had left the club. Sure enough, when Tatsuya turned up, both Mayumi and Katsuto were already waiting.

"You're alone?"

It wasn't just Katsuto who asked this, but a surprised Mayumi as well.

"Yes, you called only me after all."

Truth be told Miyuki had vehemently insisted on accompanying him, but he had somehow eventually managed to coax her cooperation. —The price had been as cheap as promising to accompany and treat her to a cake buffet.

Regardless, it was evident that Tatsuya had come by himself. While it was true that Mayumi had called out Tatsuya only, she hadn't really expected that Miyuki actually wouldn't come. Despite that, she immediately launched into the topic at hand.

"Tatsuya-kun, last night, did you go out?"

Mayumi's question was within Tatsuya's expectations.

"I did."

He didn't add 'What of it?'

"By bike?"

"Yes."

People normally become more talkative when trying to deceive another. Tatsuya at this moment however had no need to feign verbosity.

"...May I ask where you were going?"

Rather, it was Mayumi who had to puzzle over how best to proceed. She didn't have the deviousness or experience for such subtle probing. Katsuto, waiting beside her, didn't even seem to be bothered at all.

"I was called by Yoshida who was engaging the vampire, and saw there both the vampire as well as an unidentified magician who was following it."

Things could take a while at this rate, Tatsuya thought, as he voluntarily decided to advance the discussion. As Mayumi blinked in amazement, he kept his expression emotionless. Even a more experienced adult, for example Mayumi's father, would have found it difficult to read his face.

She had no idea what he was thinking.

That simply fueled Mayumi's anxiety, and her psychological defenses began to waver.

"From when?"

Perhaps stepping in to support Mayumi, or perhaps not, Katsuto came up with a question in her stead.

"I merely rushed over yesterday because I was called. I was not involved in the actual search for the vampire."

Since the question didn't ask by whom, or for what, Tatsuya omitted such things in his answer. He had no interest in finding out what Katsuto or Mayumi thought either.

"The two of you are aware that Saijou of Class 1-E was attacked, correct?"

There was no way they didn't know. He was more making a statement than asking a question. The reply was of course in the affirmative.

"It's not just me who wants to find out exactly what is going on. Until those responsible are found and apprehended, there can be no peace. Whether there's a lone culprit or a group, whether it's non-communicable or contagious; shedding light on at least these is the bare minimum."

Having been looking at the two of them while talking, Tatsuya now shifted his gaze to Mayumi alone.

"Senpai, if you don't at least tell me how much you know about the situation, or what you intend to do about it, I can't help you."

His seizing the initiative was probably the opposite of what was expected. Taking a breath, Mayumi's expression turned serious.

"If Tatsuya-kun promises to help, we'll gladly give you the information we've got. As I'm sure you know though, you mustn't leak anything."

"Understood. Let's cooperate."

Tatsuya agreed immediately to Mayumi's proposal. It was the answer she had wanted to hear, but being unable to comprehend his true intentions, she continued to scrutinize him for a while.

"...Does that mean you'll join our search parties?"

"That's what I meant."

"Why now, all of a sudden? It's not like you didn't see the conference notice."

That was Katsuto speaking. The Saegusa and Juumonji families had jointly set up 'Vampire Hunt' teams, and notices had been sent to the heads of the Ten Master Houses, 18 auxiliary houses, and Hundred Families requesting cooperation. If one is not connected with the 'Numbers' then it's certainly not something a mere high school student would have seen, yet Katsuto was basically speaking as if it were already a fact.

"Considering I'm not even of the Hundred Families, I had thought it's none of my business."

For his part, Tatsuya didn't bother trying to conceal that he had indeed read it. Obtaining non-classified notices wasn't a hard thing to do, after all.

"Being asked directly, however, is a different story."

It was a rather vague answer, but while it wasn't perfectly clear, there was nothing irregular or particularly strange about it. Thus, both Mayumi and Katsuto felt compelled to accept.

In terms of previous experience, Mayumi's exposure to Tatsuya's terrible personality was different from Katsuto's.

"...Still, is this alright? Earlier, I do believe it was said that before cooperating it'd be necessary to disclose information."

"If neither of us make concessions we won't get anywhere. Besides, even if you do back out I can do that just as easily."

At his words, which while appearing far too straightforward, seemed to contain various hidden meanings within them, Mayumi gave a dry laugh. There was a sense of secrecy coming off her, yet for the most part it looked like she simply wanted to get things over with.

"Understo~od. Then, I'll tell you everything we know at this stage. Before that though, can I say just one thing?"

"What?"

"Tatsuya-kun, your personality is too terrible."

"..."

In the information Mayumi shared, Tatsuya learned three things in particular.

First was the scale of damage. This far exceeded his previous expectations, yet still did not seem to be at a critical level yet.

Second was that it was increasingly unlikely all this was the work of a lone perpetrator. Tatsuya had considered the possibility of collaborators before, but the idea there were multiple vampires themselves had not crossed his mind.

And lastly was the presence of a third force interfering with the efforts of Mayumi and the others. At first Tatsuya had thought of Erika's group, but upon hearing the details he soon realized it was a different group altogether.

The second and third points particularly bugged Tatsuya. That masked magician likely was one of those disrupting the search parties. He could also make a good guess as to their identity.

However, he could not fathom the motive they would have to do such a thing. He felt that if only he could understand, it would make things so much easier, yet that only served to irritate him more.

"What do you intend to do after catching one?"

In order to avoid being stuck in those roundabout thoughts, Tatsuya switched issues. Though he had only promised cooperation, he couldn't simply ignore what would come after.

"We'll interrogate them, find out their true identity and purpose. After that..."

"It'll be disposal."

Katsuto finished off Mayumi's sentence. Well... Tatsuya wasn't particularly keen on hearing a phrase like 'disposal' coming from a high school girl's mouth either, so he didn't think of it as being soft or naive.

Besides, humanitarianism wasn't one of Tatsuya's strong points. Neither practically nor emotionally.

"—Got it. So, what should I do?"

"Accompany us then, I guess. If possible from toni—"

"No Shiba, move on your own. Please report in if you find anything."

At Katsuto overturning her instructions, Mayumi simply stared in silence. There was no discomfort in her eyes, but a dramatic sense of suspicion.

"Understood."

To be honest, it would have been easier for Tatsuya to go along with Mayumi's instructions. In any case he had never been too serious about his promise of 'cooperating', so he nodded without hesitation to Katsuto's words.

Revealing nothing of his own hand, and having heard everything he wanted to hear, Tatsuya left the two and departed.

When Tatsuya's footsteps were no longer audible (there were hidden mics as spy countermeasures in the room), Mayumi spoke.

"Juumonji-kun, why did you tell Tatsuya-kun to move alone?"

There wasn't reproach in her tone, but a sense of incomprehension.

"I thought it'd be more efficient that way."

Katsuto's voice as he answered lacked no confidence.

"But as things are, wouldn't he simply go with the Chibas?"

Mayumi knew that Erika's group was going around in a way contrary to the notice. Although the Ten Master Clans are leaders, they are not rulers, and so cannot easily go around enforcing their will or throwing out penalties. But in a situation where the shadows of foreign powers can be glimpsed, being headstrong and doing things one's own way was inconvenient trouble. While the combo of Chiba Erika and Yoshida Mikihiko was unavoidable, Mayumi's true intentions had been to keep at least the siblings, Tatsuya and Miyuki, within eyeshot.

"Truthfully speaking, that will likely be the case."

However Katsuto waved away Mayumi's concerns.

"As long as we keep faith, Shiba likewise will not betray us. That's the sort of man he is."

"...So an absolute form of give and take? What a subtle reliability."

"Even the code of the samurai came from 'favour' and 'duty', or give and take. I'd say it's much more trustworthy than blind submission."

"...And underlying absolute loyalty is 'dependence'. That's not something to be expected from Tatsuya-kun, nor is it something fitting the First."

At Katsuto's nod, satisfied, Mayumi returned a nod.

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Although he was still missing several crucial pieces — meaning that he had gathered enough pieces already to realize that he was yet missing something definitive — what he had collected thus far was still a satisfactory result. Going over the information he had, Tatsuya hurried over to the Student Council room where Miyuki was waiting.

It was still light out. Perfectly natural, considering it was a Saturday. School had ended, but it was barely past noon. Tatsuya wasn't hurrying because he was getting late going home, but because he was getting late for lunch.

There wasn't a prayer that Miyuki would begin eating without waiting for Tatsuya. It'd be different if he asked (ordered?) her to eat without him, but he hadn't done so today because he hadn't thought he would end up being this delayed. In fact Miyuki wouldn't have been waiting for that long, but the mere thought that he was keeping his sister was sufficient to drive his feet forwards.

—That made two of them.

Tatsuya's physical prowess was on full display as he leaped up an entire flight of stairs, to come to a stop in front of the Student Council room. The moment he did, almost as if watching and waiting, the door opened.

A brilliant gold flashed into his view.

Tatsuya slid aside while Lina backed away from the door at almost the same time. They had been trying to get out of each others way, but seeing the humorous situation they were now in, the corners of Tatsuya's mouth twitched as he stepped into the gap once occupied by the one who was blocking his way (?).

Technically he was ignoring the convention 'ladies first', but he didn't ignore the lady herself.

"Yo, Lina. How's it going?"

Turning to her as he passed, he lightly patted her on the shoulder.

"Hello, Tatsuya. I am doing fine. Thank you."

Being suddenly touched, Lina didn't cry out 'Sexual harassment!' or anything. Instead, without raising one eyebrow, she simply smiled as she returned Tatsuya's pat twice.

Both Miyuki and Honoka joyously rose at the sight of Tatsuya, as he took a seat at what he guessed was a conference table. —He didn't even want to think that it was there expressly for the Student Council members to simply have meals and drink tea off of.

There was no sign of Azusa or Isori. Not that he would have been troubled if they were here, but he did feel more comfortable this way. It wasn't that he was tense around seniors, rather that he had to take care. Particularly around Azusa, who at the slightest matter (or so Tatsuya thought) would immediately start looking terrified.

Mayumi calling him had been completely unplanned for. So, he didn't have anything prepared for lunch. Besides, if he suddenly brought up what had happened, it would definitely cause panic rather than help. Going to the cafeteria by this time would likely only lead to a view of 'Sold out' signs everywhere, so he decided to leave himself in the care of the Student Council dining server.

Honoka was operating the cooking panel, while Miyuki prepared drinks. Tatsuya's role was to sit quietly and wait to be served. ...Looking at things objectively it'd be 'what a lucky bastard', but he cut off such unproductive thoughts before they reached his conscious.

"Come to think of it, what was Lina doing here?"

Instead, he turned his mind to another matter.

"The school suggested making Lina a special Student Council member during study periods."

Setting a coffee cup before Tatsuya, Miyuki tilted round and answered his question.

Her lustrous jet black hair cascaded before Tatsuya's eyes like a waterfall. Transfixed as she lightly brushed her hair behind her back, his mind

nevertheless resolutely processed the information his ears had just received.

"Ah... That reminds me, earlier, she had said she couldn't decide on any clubs and was feeling troubled."

"Yes. The soliciting from behind the scenes had gotten rather intense... It seems that President Hattori then came up with this idea."

The one who answered this time was Honoka, bringing a steaming tray up to him. In that manner Honoka, U-turning, and Miyuki, walking around the table, brought their own trays to the table and lunchtime began.

"She's only studying here this one semester, so she wouldn't even be able to attend the athletics festival."

"I'm pretty sure there were more ulterior motives behind it."

A rather wicked smile flitted across Miyuki's face,

"There were even idiots who wanted to make photo albums of Lina to sell off."

As Honoka sighed with a frown.

"There's a photography club in this school?"

Tatsuya wouldn't have been surprised if there was, but he had no recollection of there being one.

"The Art department's photography team. They wanted to do something as moronic as have Lina join the light gymnastics club and take pictures of that."

Light gymnastics is a sort of gymnastics for magicians with the limits of gravity and inertia lowered, performing floor exercises as if on a trampoline without actually using trampolines. The Mirage Bat competition which Miyuki and Honoka had competed in was a development from light gymnastics.

"I see... Certainly, that would make for quite the picture."

"O-nii-sa-ma?"

"Although I'm not sure about selling them."

"..."

As Miyuki swung a suspicious look in his direction, Tatsuya quickly averted his gaze.

However, a similar look stared back from that direction as well.

"...Wait, that was a rather bad way to put it. Sorry."

Returning to face his sister, he raised the white flag. If he had faced those fierce glares in a 'staring contest' it was likely the girls would have caved first, but exploiting their feelings over something as trivial as this seemed like a very bad idea.

Miyuki, upon realising that Tatsuya hadn't meant anything by those words yet had acted so apologetically, was unable to contain her embarrassment and lowered her head.

"A-Anyway. Similar stories were abound, and the situation was getting to the point that the recruiting was troubling not only Lina herself but staff as well, and um..."

Honoka, often seen as someone rather intense yet in fact a delicate (or timid) person, began to fret at the strange atmosphere.

"So it was decided to make her a Student Council member."

Immediately understanding Honoka's consideration, Tatsuya came up in support,

"Yes. If she uses Student Council duties as a front, it should be enough to head off any club."

And Miyuki followed up.

Seeing that the sensitive air which had drifted between the siblings was swept away, Honoka breathed a sigh of relief. The one anticipating a quarrel between them and thinking other such disingenuous thoughts was, unfortunately(?), a different girl.

"So, what was Lina's decision?"

"She didn't seem terribly enthusiastic."

"It seemed like she wasn't keen on spending any time after school. I think that could also be the reason she's still undecided on clubs, despite being so sought after."

At Miyuki and Honoka's replies, Tatsuya nodded with a 'That just might be it' look.

◊ ◊ ◊

After dinner, Tatsuya was sitting on the sofa in the living room looking at a large screen mounted on the wall.

Miyuki was snuggled up beside him.

The screen was divided into three. The main section depicted a real time video feed of Tokyo seen through stratospheric surveillance cameras as well as three glowing dots moving through it. The top subsection had roads and maps overlaying the same three dots, while on the bottom, text scrolled by in 30 second intervals.

The reason he had access to the stratospheric platform cameras was thanks to Sanada.

The reason he had access to and could monitor the tracer signals of the Saegusa/Juumonji search parties was not because Mayumi had provided the authentication codes, but because of the unparalleled hacker Fujibayashi Kyouko.

Fujibayashi also tracked the signal of the Chiba search party at the same time.

The spots of light were apparently interference strength, the waves of which were detected by transceiver interceptors mounted on the stratospheric platforms and processed by the supercomputer belonging to the Independent Magic Battalion.

Being an experimental magic force, and as far as Tatsuya vaguely knew, being equipped with state-of-the-art technology (they wouldn't have the Mobile Suits otherwise), he was reminded again of their peculiar abilities.

And speaking of technology.

"It seems like the Stars have better technology for detecting Parasites than us."

Watching the Stars' movements as they fixed on a spot of interference strength, Tatsuya muttered in an impressed voice.

Although it was impossible to track the movements of Parasites directly, by analysing the pathway of the energy the three Parasites that they were tracking left, it was possible to trace them. And despite not having the benefit of street camera sensors nor stratospheric platform observation equipment, the ones Tatsuya estimated to be the Stars were tracing the movements of the Parasites the fastest. Tatsuya didn't know whether that was due to some special ability or advanced technology. He also didn't know whether it was specific to tracking the Parasites, or if it was capable of detecting other magical signals. All he knew was that the USNA was ahead of Japan in this field.

Tatsuya had never considered Japan's magic technology to be in the forefront of the world. He didn't consider himself to have an exhaustive knowledge of current technology either. Yet even so, he couldn't help feeling some pangs of regret and a desire to know.

"Now's not the time for that though."

Saying so and cutting off unnecessary thoughts, Tatsuya straightened.

"Onii-sama, are you going?"

As Tatsuya rose, Miyuki spoke while looking up from the sofa.

"You're a good girl, so just wait here, all right?"

Tatsuya stroked her cheek.

Miyuki raised her hand and pressed Tatsuya's palm against her cheek. It was as if she were imprinting his warmth onto her.

"I'll be waiting for you."

"Yeah. Without a doubt, sometime soon, your strength will be needed. When that time comes—"

"Yes. Then, together—it's a promise, Onii-sama."

"…Well, I don't think this situation will turn out as dangerous as Yokohama."

While Tatsuya joked, Miyuki, also smiling, released Tatsuya's hand.

Miyuki saw Tatsuya off at the doorway, equipped with his favourite CAD and other equipment as he went to battle.

She continued staring at the closed door until her brother's presence faded.

Then the moment she could no longer make sense of his whereabouts, she turned around with a snap.

There was no trace of sadness. Within her determined expression, her eyes burned with a bright light.

Miyuki returned to the living room, and hit the switch of the dimmed screen. Although by no means mechanically incompetent, in terms of strengths and weaknesses, what she now had at hand was definitely not her area of expertise.

However she was blessed with extraordinary memory. Although not as great as Tatsuya, who had vast memory capacity as a side effect of his mental remodelling, reproducing the operating procedures she had just seen earlier was not a problem.

She brought up the display she had been watching a while back with her brother. The scroll speed of the text data was a little too fast for her, but she didn't know how to change it so she bore with it.

She desperately tried to calculate her brother's whereabouts from the points of light moving around. She had been told to just 'wait', but this time she didn't intend to 'just wait'. Even if it meant going against her brother's orders, even if it meant she would be scolded when he got back, it was still far more preferable to doing nothing as her brother was hurt.

Certainly, there was little chance of a large scale conflict breaking out. In that sense, the danger was indeed less than Yokohama.

But even though the scale was small.

Even though the situation would greatly limit the use of force.

His opponent, in all probability, would end up being those Stars.

—Though having said that, there was nothing Miyuki could do.

As an individual, at 15 years of age, she possessed one of the highest levels of power in the country. It might easily be one of the highest levels of power in the world.

But her power lay not in farsight or clairvoyance.

Nor did she have the authority yet to mobilise the Yotsuba.

Unlike her brother, she did not have a personally built-up network.

None of the hacking skills of Fujibayashi either.

With no specialised magic to find Tatsuya, neither contacts nor expertise, Miyuki could only hug her chest as she stared at the screen.

It was an unconscious action.

In her chest was her heart. And although her clothes were in the way and she couldn't feel it beat, she could feel something else in its stead.

Within her chest, in her heart,

She could feel her connection to Tatsuya.

Abhorrent, latching on to her brother.

The reconfigured Limiter.

The lock and chains were none other than she herself.

She herself was also the key.

Binding her to bind her brother, it was nothing short of a curse.

Yet for all that, it was still a definite connection which linked her and her brother.

—If only I could see too—

Miyuki thought.

However far Tatsuya was from Miyuki, he was able to know her situation. She had heard that his 'vision' could analyse existential information, and things such as her whereabouts and condition were always known to him in the form of data.

In a sense that meant she had absolutely no privacy whatsoever, but that didn't bother Miyuki in the least.

She didn't have a single secret she had to keep against her brother. If there ever was something she could not say hidden in her heart, she would want him to know of it through his power. She thought so even as she knew his 'vision' didn't extend to the mental realm.

On the other hand, Miyuki had no way to 'see' her partner from a distance.

Instead, for Miyuki who was born with Mental Interference magic, she could 'sense' the 'location' of the 'mind'. By releasing the Limiter on Tatsuya and thereby freeing her own abilities, Miyuki could 'touch' the minds of others. She might even be able to touch the spirits drifting in the world.

However, she couldn't feel the 'being' of one far away. She couldn't transmit like her brother in the dimension of information, where physical distance had no meaning.

That was the difference between sight and touch. Even if she could touch something which 'is there', she couldn't use it to find something she couldn't locate.

Feeling her brother in her chest, which only heightened her sense of frustration, Miyuki thought hard.

Driven by an unexplained ominous sense of foreboding, she wished she could rush to his side.

She didn't know how long she had continued to feel so, as she stared at the screen.

Awakening her was the chime ringing, announcing an unexpected visitor.

With a start, she glanced at the clock.

Alright, let them leave, Miyuki thought. There was no fault in not even pretending to not be at home, since it was far too late an hour to be visiting others anyway.

She had a look at the intercom monitor. Recognising the visitor, Miyuki immediately modified her plans. While considering what to change into, she also calculated how long it would take.

"Please wait a moment, Sensei."

Standing there was Yakumo.

◊ ◊ ◊

Tatsuya watched the fight between the Parasite and the masked magician from the shadow of a tree.

He had gotten to the park three minutes before the battle broke out. When they had reached the predicted point of capture he had let out a sound despite himself, but now he concealed his breathing and erased his presence, awaiting an opportunity to intervene.

According to the information from Mayumi, there were multiple vampires and multiple hunters after them, but seeing the two before him he was certain they were the same two from yesterday. He had merely looked at the movement of the groups and predicted where the first contact would occur, but he hadn't identified the individuals.

(…This is a coincidence, right?)

A shiver ran down Tatsuya's spine and he almost inadvertently revealed his position. Somehow holding it back, he complained in his mind. –Something along the lines of 'if this is fate, it's far too disagreeable'.

He looked back to the state of the battle. The momentum was clearly on the side of the masked magician. By comparison, the white masked vampire was attempting to get away. And the net to block that escape was yet incomplete.

(Four people. As I thought, it's not enough.)

As three forces — if you include the police who weren't working with the Saegusa, it'd be four — ran together and got in each other's way, four magicians were converging here from four different directions. They were the away team, without any street monitoring equipment, yet had impressively managed to call in four other people unnoticed by the others, is what he would have thought, but at the end of the day it was safe to say such numbers could not hope to cut off all the escape routes in this three-dimensional city.

Which was why this situation would soon become not 'hide and seek' but 'tag'...

(Your enemy's enemy is, in the end, just another party. That one fact alone doesn't automatically make them an ally, huh.)

If all the forces pursuing the Parasites were to work together, each team had only to send this many people out and then herding them in would be a simple matter. But due to the differences in intent, it wouldn't work out. Even his own goals did not completely match with those of Mayumi or Erika.

But for the moment, the vampire was more of an enemy.

(Now then, how to make my entrance.)

Whilst predicting the various reactions the masked character could make, Tatsuya pulled from his waist not his CAD but a gun. Of course it was illegal, but that was about the furthest thing on his mind at this point. He pointed the gun at the vampire which had just made a huge leap to avoid a knife stroke with complete calm, aimed at around the belly, and casually pulled the trigger.

The average effective range of a handgun is 50 meters, while in real combat the effective range is said to be more within 20m. This had changed little from the last century, and the reason was because handguns were a weapon made with those needs in mind.

The distance between the shaded tree under which Tatsuya was hiding and the longcoat wearing phantom was about 10m. Although Tatsuya had exceeded the minimum necessary training time, he by no means practiced with a handgun every day, and it was a still a fairly difficult distance.

The gun in his hand was a single shot chambered gun designed for a special bullet. There were no second chances. He would have preferred to aim for an area of exposed skin, but he had to give up on what he couldn't do.

Besides, as the target was wearing a hat over the eyes as well as a longcoat which stretched down to the ankles in addition to a white mask which completely covered the face, it was a fair bet that there was no exposed skin in any case. There was nothing to fret over.

The low speed heavy bullet absorbed more of the discharge than a suppressor would have, yet as aimed, the bullet hit the abdomen of the coat. While the weight of the bullet was twice that of a standard 9mm, the lack of speed was compensated by the fact the vampire had been falling back towards the bullet.

The masked magician turned towards Tatsuya. Golden pupils glinted with a harsh light as they watched him.

Discernible within them was unmistakable hostility.

She abandoned her knife at the same time Tatsuya released his gun.

Her hand shot to her waist, as Tatsuya's went to his breast.

Tatsuya's hand reached his destination first.

But his finger froze midway through pulling the trigger of his CAD.

In his opponent's hand was a medium sized automatic pistol. Tatsuya's vision discerned a magic formula already formed within its barrel.

The activation speed was comparable to Tatsuya's Decomposition. It was a specialised device which began an activation sequence the moment it was gripped, cutting out the time and effort needed to operate the switch and thus seizing the initiative.

The magic triggered was Data Fortification. A magic which strengthened any bullets passing through the barrel.

Tatsuya flicked the selector of his CAD, switched from a magic for decomposing Eidos to one for decomposing entities and began activation.

His target was the chamber of the gun the masked magician held. More precisely, the bullets which would be fired from therein.

Time seemed to slow during that moment of high-density information processing as magic was activated, as Tatsuya watched the masked magician pull back the trigger of her automatic pistol while Tatsuya did the same with his CAD.

The distance between the masked magician and Tatsuya was approximately 15m. The subsonic bullets fired from that suppressed gun, which emphasised stealth, would take 0.05s to reach him.

That was almost the same as instantaneously.

However, the time after being enhanced with Data Fortification would be even less.

As the speed enhanced bullets sped through the air, they disintegrated to dust.

A jolt was evident from behind the mask.

She certainly had reason for her confidence, Tatsuya thought.

Mere 'suspension' or 'vector modification' would not have been sufficient to stop those bullets. If one had sufficient ability such as Katsuto it would be a different story, but the average magician wouldn't stand a chance. Even a magician of the combat class from the Ten Master Clans would be hard-pressed.

In Tatsuya's case, 'Decomposition' was a strong counter to 'Data Fortification' so he was able to cope, but if that hadn't been the case he would have definitely been in trouble with no countermeasures.

That was all, however, mere conjecture. And now, the masked magician had exposed a gap before Tatsuya.

He fired off magic the instant he became aware of that gap.

The magic he had failed to fire off initially, now hit the masked magician head-on.

Reflected in Tatsuya's vision, things such as 'color', 'shape', 'sound', 'heat' and 'position' were written as information. He targeted not the magician herself, but rather locking on to her disguise magic he released the anti-magic Gram Dispersion.

Decomposing the magic formula itself, it stripped her insubstantial outer covering and scattered it away.

—In that instant,

—the demon was reborn as an angel.

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The night sky was filled with stars. Within the inside of the motor sedan which was racing along the highway in the heart of the city, views of the

outside came as 3D imagery as neither sound nor vibrations transferred through.

"...Sensei."

Sitting in the back seat of that quiet cabin, Miyuki hesitantly opened her mouth.

The person she was addressing was the Ninjutsu user sitting next to her, Kokonoe Yakumo.

"Nn, what is it?"

Yakumo opened his eyes, and turned to face Miyuki.

"Why at this time...are you helping? If I remember, your rule had always been to not get involved in the real world."

It was caution, or rather observance of Buddhist principles. The meanings were different, but the results were similar. And the commandments Yakumo had imposed on himself involved both.

"Well, there are some circumstances involved."

Yakumo's tone was frivolous as always, and it was difficult for Miyuki to see through to the true intent beneath.

"Though I discarded all earthly bonds when I took up my ordination, I did not discard my work as a shinobi. It wasn't my call alone to make after all."

Not that he couldn't, but that he *didn't*. There was no sense of regret, but rather the feeling that Yakumo considered it to be perfectly natural...that was what Miyuki read.

"There are those who call it the responsibility or obligation of those who have inherited skills...it may be considered the height of worldliness, but even in Buddhism, authority is not free from tradition so it should be acceptable I guess?"

Although he had technically asked a question, Miyuki had no answer. Nevermind Miyuki, it wasn't something you'd ask a 15 year old girl in general.

"Haah..."

The best she could do were ambiguous words of support. It seemed that Yakumo's disciple in the driver's seat was sending signals reminiscent of raised eyebrows, but that may have been just her imagination.

"The thing is, I heard from Kazama-kun that the enemy Tatsuya-kun was facing may have been using the Kudou's 'Parade'. If that really is the case, we'll have to give them a warning. The one who taught the Kudou 'Matoi', which they developed into Parade, was my predecessor after all."

The whole thing's such a pain, Yakumo sighed.

That indiscreet remark however passed Miyuki by.

"The precursor to the Kudou's secret technique 'Parade', was taught by Sensei's master..."

If it had been Tatsuya, he would probably have just said 'ah, so that sort of thing happens' and simply accepted it. But for Miyuki, it wasn't as easy to swallow.

"Oh? You didn't know? The purpose of the Ninth Institute had been to develop magicians who could implement streamlined and re-systematised Ancient magic into modern magic. To that end, the Ninth Institute gathered many Ancient users. My predecessor was amongst them."

Naturally, Miyuki had no idea.

Rather, the idea that a high school girl would be knowledgeable about the dark side of modern magic, the sealed miseries which were the Magic Ability Development Institutes, was more absurd. Even Miyuki, an inheritor of the results of the most infamous Fourth Institute, would be clueless as to what the other institutes had been up to.

"...Then could it be, Sensei's family name[2]?"

Miyuki's eyes widened as she gasped, and she inquired with a pale expression.

"No, you're just overthinking things."

He probably guessed what Miyuki was thinking immediately. Laughing bitterly, Yakumo shook his hands in denial.

"The name Kokonoe is merely something I inherited from my predecessor."

The air in the car eased up a little. But that warmth plunged back down almost immediately.

"Anyway, it was under those circumstances that my predecessor taught the Kudou 'Matoi' and they developed it into 'Parade'. It involves original secret techniques of our own. So if the magician tangled with Tatsuya-kun is truly using 'Parade', they'll have to be warned not to flash it around any further. And if they're not inclined to listen, well, that'd be most unfortunate."

Yakumo's tone and expression were as carefree as ever. And yet, Miyuki felt a chill run down her spine. Nor was it just her. Gripping the wheel, Yakumo's disciple's hunched shoulders were rigid as stone.

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A demon turning into an angel. That was the impression left on Tatsuya's mind, so vivid was the change.

The scarlet hair, reminiscent of the darkness of the abyss blazed into gold shining in the feeble light.

Cruel golden eyes transformed into the serene blue of an azure sky.

The curves of her face softened, and her figure slimmed down.

Even her height seemed to shrink slightly.

Such beauty couldn't possibly have been hidden by such a small mask.

Of course, if one could change even their physique, it's no wonder they could have fooled the world.

If various evidence had not built up until now, even Tatsuya probably would not have known.

Tatsuya's hand moved unconsciously. From the hand of the golden-haired sapphire-eyed girl flew another five bullets, all of which disintegrated before reaching him.

Then just before she could fire off any more bullets, the slide of her handgun flew off and the barrel fell out.

Being forced to stop shooting, not to mention having her device impossibly destroyed by magic, the masked girl froze.

"That's enough, Lina! I don't want to fight you!"

Taking advantage of the lull, Tatsuya tried to contain the situation. His goal today was the capture of the Parasite. To restrain it, and find out its identity. That was why he had taken the hard route of firing a bullet which would shoot out an anesthetic needle from that single-shot gun.

To him, the fight with the masked magician/Lina was a pointless waste of time. That line should have been the end of the battle, but...

It was a bad move — achieving instead the opposite effect. From behind the mask, blue eyes glinted with a hard light.

Returning the wrecked specialised CAD to its holster with her right hand, she withdrew it holding miniature throwing daggers instead.

The magicians of the USNA favour and make widespread use of integrated armament CADs. It was more than possible that those daggers weren't simple blades, but some sort of armament device.

Short boots kicked off from the surface of the softcourt. It was hardly a speed one would expect out of a young lady, but it didn't exceed the limits of ordinary men.

Tatsuya took a ball of lead out from his pocket and flicked out his fingers.

Whistling through the air, it flew straight towards Lina's right hand — and passed right on through.

There was no spray of blood. It hadn't hit flesh, but rather an illusion.

At that moment Lina pulled back her arm. The dagger sped towards Tatsuya from a meter away from where his naked eye had perceived it.

Jumping aside to dodge, Tatsuya's eyes traced its trajectory. Where his eyes led, he saw an illusion throwing another dagger.

His naked eyes saw a small masked girl, yet his minds eye knew it was only an insubstantial stereoscopic image.

(How troublesome!)

Tatsuya let out a wordless complaint. The difference between knowing and actually dealing with something really was quite pronounced.

The technique Parade created an Information Body containing all the elements 'color', 'shape', sound', 'heat' and 'position'. It was the same as Yakumo's 'Matoi'.

Unlike 'Matoi', which projected a Body identical to the original in color, shape, sound and heat yet with a different position, Lina's Parade emphasised projecting different colors and a different shape. However, that didn't mean Parade was unable to shift position too. The technique which the Kudou devised, and Lina inherited, was perfectly capable of doing so as well.

Right now Lina was focusing the computing power for changing color and shape all into changing position, preventing Tatsuya from getting a grip on her real location. And without target coordinates, he was unable to cast magic. Magic which required coordinates based on determination from visual information was as good as disabled once the target was no longer in sight. And the difference between 'Parade' and an illusion was that the false position carried over even into the dimension of information.

For magic to take effect, the magic sequence must be projected upon the target's Eidos. For example, to execute a file on a computer, the path of the directory where the file is located must be specified and an execution command must be carried out, but since specifying the path every time is laboursome a shortcut is often used. If the shortcut is changed to instead specify a path leading to an inexistent dummy file, then despite carrying out the same procedure as before, rather than executing the actual file an error will occur.

Applying this principle to the magic process, in most cases the visual information is the shortcut icon, and within it is the auditory and temperature tactile information. If the visual information is disrupted due to an illusion the magic will not trigger, yet if the illusion and true body are overlapping the sequence can still reach the Eidos through the coordinate information most of the time. In this case, despite a delay the magic will function as normal.

Even if the illusion is in a different place, it's still possible to take the association between the illusion and true body as a key and attempt to locate the position of the true body. But if the coordinates are faked and a dummy is present in the dimension of information, the magic formula

released taking the information from the five senses as a shortcut acts instead towards the dummy, the result of which is 'nothing happened'.

This is the system of the anti-magic 'Parade'.

—Thus in order to break through 'Parade',

—it's necessary to either locate the body between the time when the old illusion breaks down and a new illusion is created,

—or disregard the five senses to find the coordinates of the body directly in the dimension of information.

The former was currently not going so well. To make matters worse, Lina's magic activation was blindingly fast. Her activation speed surpassed that of even Miyuki. Not to mention, she would have especially practiced this particular magic to death. The speed at which she reactivated the magic was utterly monstrous.

For Tatsuya, the latter method was a possibility. Being under constant physical attack, however, the majority of his perception was in the material realm, and shifting into the immaterial would be a considerable gamble.

(—There's no choice.)

As she pulled out the fifth dagger, Tatsuya decided. Unable to find the body before a new illusion sprang up, nor able to locate his target's Eidos in the dimension of information, he settled for the third option.

He took out a small cylindrical can from the pocket of his jacket.

And threw it lightly upwards.

For a split second, a confused expression floated on Lina's face, yet upon recognising what the 'can' was, her eyes widened.

It was a miniature canister grenade.

"Je—"

Jesus, was probably the word she was going for. But Lina didn't have the chance to finish. Wasting not the time to utter even that short word, she threw up an objective barrier.

(Fixed Deceleration.)

On the other hand, Tatsuya Flash Casted a magic for constantly decelerating the movement speed of objects. If he had tried creating a weak barrier with his virtual magic area, it would have been impossible for him to completely block out his own canister grenade (a grenade specialised for throwing out shrapnel). And if he had used speed stopping suspension magic, it was possible that it would lose out to the sheer kinetic energy of the projectiles and fail to modify the event.

Which was why he used fixed deceleration. Even then, he wouldn't have been able to achieve a large scale deceleration like to a hundredth or a thousandth of velocity.

By combining the fact it was a weapon he had prepared and knew everything about with his virtual magic area's interference strength, he was able to produce magic of the bare minimum required for success.

Fixed deceleration alone, however, couldn't stop the shrapnel. It wasn't a magic designed for that task. As he turned to his side and dropped to his knees, tiny shards peppered his flank, thigh, and the arm he had raised to cover his head.

Very few penetrated the fabric of the artificial leather with a minor bulletproof capacity, but still over a dozen were now digging into the flesh of his limbs.

[Self restoration / Auto start]

(Self restoration cancel)

Willfully suppressing his self restoration which automatically tried to initiate, Tatsuya leaped towards Lina who was completely unscathed behind a barrier. He immediately began working to decompose the anti-personnel barrier Lina had newly thrown up. Being completely caught off guard, even Lina couldn't manage any more than that.

"...How reckless, Tatsuya."

Lina was thrown onto the ground, and Tatsuya pressed down from above. Pinned to the ground, Lina spoke in an amazed voice. Her lips, not hidden behind her mask, were curled into a smile, but it wasn't difficult to see through her bravado.

"It's textbook when dealing with an opponent you can't locate to simply bring out non-directional attacks, right?"

"That's called an indiscriminate attack."

"Feel free to think so. Unfortunately, I simply don't have the skill to cast area effect magic. Well, if it's Lina I'm sure you would've been able to defend against that anyway, so with that said please forgive me."

"If you incapacitate yourself in the process, I think it defeats the whole purpose."

"Without resorting to this, there was absolutely no catching you."

"You wanted to catch me? If you're going to declare your love, I'd have preferred a more romantic manner."

Looking downwards into those azure eyes, Tatsuya grinned. He was pinning both of Lina's hands above her head with one palm.

When he moved his free hand towards her mask, Lina's shoulder twitched. The fingers of her left hand wrapped in thick gloves tried to move, but Tatsuya forcibly splayed them open.

"...It hurts, Tatsuya."

"Unfortunately, I know the trick of that CAD. Now then..."

Tatsuya's hand took hold of the mask.

Lina closed her eyes, and turned away. Even though her identity had long since been exposed, she still seemed reluctant to show her true face.

Tatsuya didn't understand the thinking behind such rationale, but it wasn't like he was trying to strip her, so he had no reason to stop.

"Activate, [Dancing Blades]!"

The moment his hand touched the mask, Lina facing away cried out.

The five daggers Lina had thrown out responded to the sound of her voice, and whirled towards Tatsuya.

(A voice activated armament is it...a device which activates not on an activation sequence but on a delay trigger is pretty interesting.)

Sensing the daggers rushing at him, Tatsuya muttered to himself.

Two were aimed at his right hand holding the mask, one at his right shoulder, one his left arm and one his leg.

None targeted his vitals.

Come to think of it, all of Lina's attacks had been meant to disable, none with the intent to kill...as he considered such things, the daggers had already reached his flesh.

And the moment they made contact, they dissolved into dust.

"Corrosion...no, Decomposition...?"

Lina's eyes returned to face Tatsuya, as they widened in shock.

Paying it no mind, Tatsuya began peeling off the mask.

Lina tried to resist, violently shaking her head, but Tatsuya's hand was immovable.

"You'll regret this, Tatsuya!"

"The moment the target I should have successfully captured fled, I felt plenty enough regret."

During the scuffle with Lina, the Parasite had escaped a good distance away. Even though he had insurance, he couldn't help feeling frustration over the whole affair. Lina should have been after the vampire too, so what in the world were her intentions in helping it escape filled Tatsuya's thoughts.

Despite being faced by those teary eyes, being pleaded to in such a desperate voice, Tatsuya felt no obligation to hesitate. He removed the receivers acting as clasps on her ears. As expected, it seemed the mask acted as an information terminal.

He gently removed the mask which was made of a surprisingly firm material. Even Tatsuya, who was more than accustomed to good looks, couldn't help almost letting out a sigh at the sheer beauty now revealed.

Lina clenched her lips and glared at Tatsuya.

The very next moment, heartrending screams issued from those lips.

At that totally abrupt development, Tatsuya was stunned.

His arm restraining Lina's hands didn't loosen however, having been mercilessly educated as a subordinate of the unscrupulous Kazama.

"Someone, anyone help!"

It was like she was crying to be saved from a rapist.

Although not a rapist, Tatsuya's very convincing cold eyes weren't helping his case.

As if lying in wait for Lina's scream as a signal, the sound of rushing footsteps could be heard. Wearing navy blue uniforms under scarlet bulletproof vests lined with white reflective paint, four people hurried in from four directions. The emblem that shone on their caps was the sakura crest.

Grasping Lina's left arm, Tatsuya forcibly tore off the glove from her left hand.

With the sensation of a cord ripping, Lina's white hand was revealed.

"Put your hands in the air and turn around!"

A policeman — or at least a man dressed up like one — yelled as he ran up while aiming a handgun.

Tatsuya spun behind Lina, and rushed the man.

Lina was pushed into the chest of the man as he gave a cry.

The man caught her.

And Tatsuya, vaulting overhead, landed on the man's shoulders.

As if booting a soccer ball, he slammed a kick right into his face.

Leaping off the shoulder of the man who crumpled back without a sound, Tatsuya slipped out from the encircling fake cops.

"...What in the world would you have done if he had been a real cop?"

Lina's voice was absolutely disbelieving.

However,

"It's really time you dropped the act, Angie Sirius."

At Tatsuya's reply, the atmosphere hardened.

"If they're aiding you, it doesn't matter if they're real or not. Although complacent 100 years ago, modern criminal law states that even unwittingly abetting foreign aggressors is grounds for prosecution. If you think dressing up as cops is enough to scare people, you're gravely mistaken. Don't underestimate the resolution of the magicians of Japan."

The three fake officers, excluding the one kicked down, turned to await the decision of Lina, of their commander Angie Sirius.

With a sigh Lina faced Tatsuya and, lightly bending her knee, gave a polite bow.

"We're sorry for the rudeness. Truly, we underestimated you. There's a great difference between hearing and seeing. As a fellow magician, I apologize."

Then she aligned her feet, stood up straight and placed her right hand to the side of her forehead. Even without a military cap, it was unmistakably a salute.

Earlier she had been just another magician, but now she was acting as the captain of the USNA military magician corps. That was what Tatsuya interpreted her gesture as.

"I am the captain of the USNA army integrated magician force Stars, reporting directly to the Chiefs of Staff, Major Angelina Sirius. Angie Sirius was the name I went under during my previous disguise, so please just continue calling me Lina as you always have done. Now then."

The killing intent which she had kept under wraps for the sake of courtesy, now assaulted Tatsuya in full force.

"Now that you know both my true face and true identity, Tatsuya, the Stars have no option but to annihilate you. If you had left the mask on we could have avoided this, however much a deception it would have been; it's a pity."

"Are you telling me you regret this?"

In the midst of that bloodthirstiness, Tatsuya laughed fearlessly.

"If you had just stayed quiet and allowed yourself to be caught, we could have ended this without killing at the least."

"My bad. I've let your heartfelt consideration go to waste."

"No, what will be taking your life is our self-centered circumstance, so there's nothing to apologize for. You may even feel free to resist."

One of the fake cops handed out to her a combat knife in one hand, and a medium-sized handgun in the other. A blade form armament device, and a gun shaped specialised CAD.

Tatsuya also drew his CAD.

"This really is a shame, Tatsuya. I had gotten to quite like you."

Stretching out her left hand, Lina pointed her CAD at Tatsuya.

Stretching out his right hand, Tatsuya pointed his CAD at Lina.

Lina's subordinates took positions behind him. He was surrounded.

"...Goodbye, Tatsuya."

"I won't let you, Lina!"

Suddenly at that moment, a commanding voice cold as deepest winter froze the air.

A startled light floating into her eyes, Lina turned towards the sound of the voice.

As if covering their now wide-open superior, Lina's subordinates moved in to simultaneously attack Tatsuya from three sides.

Large combat knives swung towards Tatsuya. Extending from the blades edges was 'Molecular Divider'.

Tatsuya pulled the trigger of his CAD. The virtual territory, designed to invert the bonds holding molecules together, vanished in spite of the operators intent.

Now that the combat knives were mere blades, Tatsuya broke out from the net. One of Lina's subordinates, running right past Tatsuya, suddenly pressed a hand to his stomach and fell over. Welling out from between his fingers was blood.

His blood-soaked left hand flung out. Blood splattered towards the other fake cops.

One of them stopped in his tracks, and the other one ran right into him.

Tatsuya's right hand returned to point towards Lina.

Lina's left hand was aimed at the person who had gotten in her way — Miyuki.

The activation sequence she initiated was dispelled by Tatsuya's 'Gram Dispersion'.

Before a man could jump at Tatsuya, a cold which chilled the blood of all the attackers descended.

The man's footsteps came to an abrupt halt.

Behind him stalked up a shadow.

Wordlessly, the man fell unconscious.

The one person remaining was already flat on the ground.

"Well, Tatsuya-kun, that was pretty dangerous."

Having incapacitated two of the Stars members in an instant, Yakumo strolled up with the same unconcerned expression as always.

Seeing that figure able to maintain 'as always' even in this situation, Tatsuya acknowledged his own inexperience.

"How shameless, master. Despite the fact you were waiting to make the perfect entrance."

Being impressed in spite of himself was vexing, so he threw out sarcasm instead.

At that line, Lina's eyes widened.

In front of her was Miyuki, CAD prepped and battle ready.

Tatsuya's right hand was aimed straight at Lina.

Yakumo's eyes were directed towards Tatsuya, but Lina was also fully within his field of view.

The one surrounded was now Lina.

"Well, I guess this is fine. There are some things I had wanted to ask you anyway."

"Eh, was that so Onii-sama?"

Miyuki turned around in dismay. Looking away from Lina she left herself wide open, but due to the increased pressure from both Tatsuya and Yakumo, Lina was paralysed.

Immediately noticing her own blunder, Miyuki also returned her focus to Lina in a hurry.

"You allowed yourself to be surrounded on purpose in order to draw information from them right...and without considering that, I just stormed in. Please forgive me, Onii-sama."

Still turned towards Lina, Miyuki spoke in an apologetic voice as she begged Tatsuya's pardon.

"No, it really was dangerous, so your judgment wasn't wrong. Therefore there's nothing to apologize for. Rather, I should be the one expressing my gratitude. Miyuki, thank you."

"Onii-sama...there's no need..."

Miyuki muttered with a dazed expression. Well, Miyuki apologising to Tatsuya and then this happening was pretty much a guaranteed occurrence. Or like some sort of ritual. Despite never taking her eyes off Lina, Miyuki was paying only the bare minimum of attention.

"Besides, I can simply start asking them now."

This was spoken towards Miyuki, but they were also meant for Lina. From the way he spoke every word clearly, Lina realised his intent.

"...Are you going to try to force me to talk?"

"Interrogation generally involves force."

Lina spoke through ground teeth, and Tatsuya returned an indirect confirmation.

"Three on one is cheating! Unfair!"

"Unfair...just how many of you were ganging up on Onii-sama earlier?"

At that vexed cry of complaint, Miyuki hit back dumbfounded.

"Come now, don't say that."

Before her shock turned to anger, Tatsuya soothed his imouto.

"Fair is a façade[3] when in a favourable position to maintain that condition, and unfair is an expedience when at a disadvantage to wring concessions from the other side. From a tactical perspective, using words to avoid conflict when one cannot win through force is not wrong. The moment you're drawn in is when you lose, Miyuki."

"I see, so that's what it was."

It was rather blunt, but at least it managed to achieve its effect of calming Miyuki down.

"Façade? Expedience?"

At the same time, it had the effect of setting Lina off.

Incidentally, Yakumo was just muffling his laughter all the while.

"I don't want to be told that by you Japanese who aren't ashamed to hide your true intentions with a façade!"

"Aren't you 1/4 Japanese yourself?"

"..."

"The 'Parade' you use was developed in Japan, and the reason you can use it is because of the Kudou, in other words Japanese, blood flowing within you right? Besides which, double standards are the hallmark of the

white establishment. I've yet to hear of a people who don't separate their true feelings from their façade."

Lina silently glared at Tatsuya, her white skin flushed bright red. Silently, as she didn't even let out a groan.

Facing Lina's eyes with his terrible grin, Tatsuya noticed her bloodlust had completely faded and he smiled wryly.

"...Is something strange?"

"No, I'm just thinking that interrogating Lina at this rate is just going to make her more obstinate."

"At least call it pride!"

Knowing the difference between obstinacy and pride, her Japanese really isn't bad, Tatsuya thought, impressed. —Not that that was very relevant.

"The other groups will be here soon too..."

"Wait! Are you listening to me at all??"

It was best to ignore the irrelevant things.

"Lina, let's have a fair deal. If you think three on one is unfair, what about a one on one. If you win, we'll let you go for today. If I win, you'll have to truthfully answer our questions. How's that?"

Even if Lina won, Tatsuya still knew her true identity, and if he won, she would have to talk. Although the match would be one on one, the conditions still weren't balanced.

"...Fine." "Please wait!"

As Lina accepted bitterly, Miyuki spoke up at the same time.

Both Tatsuya and Lina looked over at Miyuki.

Undaunted, Miyuki spoke clearly.

"Onii-sama, please leave the match with Lina to me."

"Miyuki, just what are you..."

"Lina, remember this. I will never forgive those who intend harm on Onii-sama. I think of you as my rival and my friend, but when you declared

your intent to kill him, even if those were mere words, I absolutely will not forgive it. By my own hands, I will have you realise your sin."

Miyuki's eyes shone with a fully serious light. Seeing that far too deep obsession, it seemed like Lina would laugh it off as deception, but she only let out a chuckle.

"Don't worry. I won't kill you."

Miyuki's words declared it was already her victory.

"Hmph...Miyuki, you think you can win against me? I, who hold the name of Sirius, me!"

Hearing that, the flames of battle flared up in Lina's chest.

The two queens glared at one another.

"Alright. Miyuki, I leave it to you. Is that fine with you, Lina?"

"Thank you very much, Onii-sama."

"Have it your way. If I lose, I'll tell you whatever you want. Not that that will ever happen though!"

The agreement was made. And so it was that the two extraordinary beauties prepared to raise the curtain on a magnificent duel.

◊ ◊ ◊

Miyuki's prowess with cooling and freezing magic was unrivaled.

However the nature of her magic came from shutting down the motion of molecular vibration, and wasn't derived from the harnessing of snow spirits or ice demons. Of course, it wasn't like in those settings common to fantasies aimed at young kids, where receiving the patronage of such a spirit granted immunity to cold. The point being.

Cold is cold.

Riding tandem in a bike in the midst of this midwinter night, there was no way she wouldn't have been cold.

So—

(There's no problem in being like this, right...it's cold after all.)

While clinging tightly to Tatsuya, pressing her cheek to his back as well as her chest, Miyuki repeated such an excuse in her head.

—Is there any point in making excuses by this time? Was something that was best left unsaid.

Flicking a glance at the headlights of the motorcycle right behind him, if anyone had seen his expression, it could only have been described as 'mischievous'.

From his position he was unable to see Miyuki at all behind Tatsuya's shadow, but he was perfectly able to predict what her actions, condition and expression would be. To him, the feelings the siblings had for each other were something quite of interest.

As the corners of his mouth twitched, he felt a rising tension from next to him. It seemed like his smile had been misinterpreted.

"There's no need for such concern. As long as you follow the agreement, I have no intention of harming you."

"...Considering the position I'm in, are you really telling me to believe that?"

Her eyes fixed forwards, Lina replied in a harsh voice. No, rather than 'harsh' it would be 'stiff'.

"Well, I can see where you're coming from."

Caught between Yakumo and his disciple in the back seat of the sedan, if anyone had seen her position they would no doubt have assumed she was being escorted. Knowing the power of the men sitting beside her, that feeling only deepened.

Yakumo had taken out two Stars in the blink of an eye.

Without any one of them noticing at all, that black clad— ninja had suddenly appeared right behind them. The back of the man gripping the wheel had no openings either.

Even at three to one odds she didn't think they would have been opponents she couldn't defeat, but she knew she would most likely not escape unscathed either.

"But you can be at ease."

Perceiving her tension, and estimating that it stemmed from her vigilance and hostility, Yakumo spoke in a relaxed tone.

For Lina, that was even more disconcerting.

"I have no interest in what happens between you and Tatsuya-kun. My only interest is the proper handing down of our secrets. All I ask of you is, like I said earlier, to not reveal what we taught the Kudou to others. So that those who are not privileged to know do not learn."

"...You don't care even for your national interests?"

"Nope."

"Not even world peace? The future of humanity?"

"Not in the least. I'm a recluse."

"You're a magician as well, aren't you!"

Yakumo's words were simply irreconcilable with Lina's values. And so, she unnecessarily wasn't able to believe him.

"I am a shinobi. Not a magician."

Yakumo replied to her in a calm voice. A decisive refutation.

"...Aren't Ninjutsu users a type of magician?"

"Just because we can use magic, doesn't mean we must become magicians."

She knew what he meant.

She could understand.

Yet even so, Lina could not agree to what Yakumo said.

"In the same way, just because one became a magician doesn't automatically place an obligation upon them to serve their country."

She couldn't agree, but for some reason, she couldn't object either.

The car Lina rode in stopped somewhere at a riverbank.

'Somewhere' was in the sense that Lina had no idea where it was, but guessing from their travel time it should still be within the city or the suburbs. Lina was surprised that such a metropolitan city like Tokyo still had such places.

No lights were visible at all.

With the sedan's headlights turned off, as well as the lights of the bike behind, the place was pitch black.

With no moon, and only the starlight to guide them through the darkness, Tatsuya and Miyuki walked up.

All of a sudden, Lina was attacked by anxiety.

Her CAD had not been taken, but she no longer had her transmitter or communications terminal. She hadn't been subject to a body check, but all her equipment had been guessed and she had had no choice but to obediently hand them over.

She was assured that they would be returned to her later, but for now, she had no way of contacting her compatriots as to her whereabouts. A satellite should have been monitoring her movements, but the ones taking her here were skilled in the art of 'Ninjutsu', well known for their illusionary shadow magic. It was more than plausible they could fool even military grade high resolution satellite cameras.

—It was possible that she had been brought to this isolated place to be confined. In the worst case, she might even be assassinated.

Lina tightly squeezed the CAD at her breast through her clothes.

—In that worst case, she would have to play her trump card.

"I can pretty much guess what you're thinking, but we're seriously going to keep our word so relax."

It took all Lina had to not cry out. Being spoken to so suddenly, she couldn't suppress a shiver. When she turned around, she saw Tatsuya, who had closed in enough for his expression to be visible under the starlight, laughing silently.

"I'm just reminding you of the conditions. If you answer the questions I have, we'll drop you off at the station."

Being the other party, it was a very outrageous laugh.

"That's only if you win."

Naturally, Lina's voice was sour.

"Of course. In that case, we'll carry out the terms as well."

His shamelessness, not decreasing in the least, was irritating her more and more, yet Lina knew that getting all worked up here would only worsen her position.

Tightly clenching her teeth, she set her eyes behind Tatsuya — towards Miyuki.

Eyes overflowing with fighting spirit stared back. Miyuki too was already brimming with motivation.

"Now then...Lina may be dissatisfied with this, but the referee will be Master. All he'll be refereeing however is deciding who wins and who loses, so he won't be pausing the match or interfering partway through."

"I knew that there would be no one but enemies here from the start, so there's nothing to be dissatisfied over."

"That's very good grace."

Tatsuya coolly cruised over her sarcastic comment.

Her frustration had been boiling over, yet now Lina suddenly felt calm.

"Then, this humble servant Kokonoe Yakumo will be your referee for this match. The victory conditions are when one party surrenders, or is rendered incapable of further combat. No killing please. That would only lead to ill-will."

"Understood. That's perfectly fine."

"I'll finish everything long before that."

Miyuki nodded quietly, while Lina gave a spirited agreement.

While their attitude was contrasting, their absolute faith in their own victory was shared.

Everything was on edge.

"Then, shall we start?"

"Master, one moment please."

Unfortunately, someone who was totally incapable of reading the mood was there. Absolutely ignoring the stares Yakumo and Lina were sending him, Tatsuya walked to his little sister.

He approached to within two feet of her, yet still didn't stop.

"Um, Onii-sama?"

Without replying to Miyuki, who was confusedly unable to guess her brother's intent,

One foot.

He continued on.

He finally stopped close enough to be able to hold Miyuki if he stretched out,

—and embraced her.

"Ummmumumum."

Being held so tightly at the waist, Miyuki blushing furiously began to panic. A third party would probably have found that odd, considering how much she had been hugging him just earlier, but to her hugging and being hugged were two entirely separate things.

Tatsuya's other hand caressed Miyuki's head.

Miyuki was no longer capable of sound.

Running his fingers through his sister's hair,

Drawing her face which had ceased all resistance to his lips,

Tatsuya gave Miyuki a kiss on the forehead.

When he finally let go, Miyuki's wide-eyed face was revealed.

There was no embarrassment, only frozen shock.

"This...why..."

"You showed me how to do this earlier, and while it's imperfect, I remembered the gist of it. Although it's only temporary, I restore your power to you. Please compete to your heart's content."

"...Yes!"

At her brother's words, in utter earnest, Miyuki nodded with an indomitable smile.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, master."

Lina, standing next to Yakumo, was making a face as if she had eaten too much and gotten heartburn.

"Lina as well...I know that was rude, but you don't mind a few moments right?"

"You're one to talk...no, it's fine."

Replying to the (in her eyes) now utterly indifferent Tatsuya, Lina answered in her most sarcastic voice.

Miyuki didn't follow behind. It seemed she didn't intend to engage in close combat.

From Lina's observations so far and in the light of this, Lina determined that Miyuki was a typical magician deficient in physical abilities. For the rogue magician executioner 'Sirius', they were the easiest type of prey.

(I'll end this in one blow!)

There had been no starting signal yet, but Lina had no intention of waiting for any such thing. There had been nothing in the arrangements about a signal after all.

Close the gap with self-acceleration magic, neutralise the opponent's magic with Data Fortification, then eliminate in CQC.

Then while Tatsuya and the others were distracted by Miyuki's loss, use high speed magic to make an escape.

That was the plan.

However, she could only let out a silent cry.

One step faster than she could activate magic, a tempest was rushing in.

The moment Lina leaped aside, a torrent of frozen air flashed past. As she raised her head, this time she saw a blizzard howling in from the side. By manipulating air density and creating a wall of vacuum, Lina was able to weather the storm somehow.

"I guess this much isn't enough."

As Miyuki muttered to herself, the night air began to gather around her.

Lina clenched her teeth.

In terms of activation speed, Lina wins over Miyuki.

For Miyuki to have made the first move, meant she must have set up earlier.

Not to mention the two volleys just earlier were sequences designed to maximise speed at the cost of power.

Lina felt shamed twice over.

Both at her intention to exploit her opponent's naivety, and being caught off guard in turn.

She had thought she could win even with powered down attacks and, in fact, she had come dangerously close.

(But now it's my turn!)

The gap was likely in order to cast a stronger magic for the decisive blow. But that would be fatal, Lina thought. As she did so, she simultaneously activated self-acceleration and Data Fortification.

By cladding herself in self-acceleration magic which lowered both gravity and inertia, Lina rushed straight towards Miyuki. Her right hand grasped what had looked like decorative buttons on her jacket.

She hadn't taken out her gun, but this much should be more than enough to take out a high school girl.

Then the moment Lina was five meters away, her intuition screamed for her to halt.

She planted her feet firmly to resist a gale which suddenly threatened to pull her body in.

She applied a static magic on herself to further counter that drag force.

In that position, she triggered movement magic on the buttons in her hand. The buttons, empowered to move at 300 km/h without acceleration, slowed and dropped to the ground before they had traveled even one meter.

Miyuki's senses had felt Lina blazing in faster than the eye could see.

Although she couldn't draw data directly from the dimension of information like Tatsuya, it was possible to perceive the traces of event modification left by magic. This was something any magician could do at varying levels, and anything a magician could do Miyuki could do at the highest level.

Self-acceleration was a magic which caused event modification on the user themselves. Therefore by tracking the traces of event modification in real time, it was possible to determine the position of the caster. Miyuki had learned how to exploit that weakness of self-acceleration from Tatsuya.

Everything so far had proceeded just as planned. Her saying "I guess this much isn't enough" had been deliberate, a suggestive ploy to provoke the other side.

The clincher would be this next magic.

([Deceleration Zone])

The technique itself was rather commonplace. It was a magic widely used both in Japan and abroad to slow the movement of a target object.

But when Miyuki uses this magic, her targets can extend even to gas molecules.

The movement speed of gas molecules is proportional to its pressure. To be precise (although this is still just an approximation) in an enclosed space, the pressure of a gas is proportional to the square of its movement speed. By forcibly decelerating the movement speed of air molecules in a region the pressure falls, and the resulting pressure gradient causes air from the surrounding space to move in.

Rapidly and forcefully.

Not just air, but people and objects were sucked in as well.

If a person caught in this had insufficient power to oppose the magic, they would be deprived of their movement speed and trapped.

And if the person had sufficient interference power to shut down the magic, the greatly decelerated gas molecules would suddenly regain their speed and expansion back to an appropriate pressure would occur; in other words, an explosion.

A magic which originally was only used in battle as a second option to reduce the impact of projectiles when lacking the power to outright stop them, had been wrought into a two-fold anti-personnel magic by Miyuki's overwhelming magic power.

However, Lina held her ground against the raging suction force.

What she had shot out had looked like ornamental buttons.

Merely given some initial velocity there was no way those clumps of resin could break through Miyuki's Deceleration Zone, but more importantly, they had clued Lina in as to exactly just what kind of magic Miyuki was using.

(If that's the case!)

Always be prepared two, three steps ahead of your opponent, was something repeatedly taught to her by Tatsuya on a daily basis. If the plan to draw the opponent into Deceleration Zone and eliminate her there failed, she had planned strategies to take her down outside the area as well.

Whilst doubling over the inside zone, Miyuki released the outer area.

The forcibly slowed air molecules returned to their original speed.

The air, once contained in a small area was freed in a great rush of pressure, and engulfed Lina in a blast.

The traces of a large scale phenomena alteration disappeared.

According to her instinct, Lina flattened herself on the ground and cast an objective barrier above.

A blast wave washed over the top of the shield. The high-speed air flow threatened to lift her shield and all off the ground, and after holding by applying major inertial increase magic several times whilst remaining prone, Lina raised her head and looked for an opportunity to counterattack — or rather to assess the situation.

Lina had no intention of leisurely(?) waiting for a chance to arise.

Up to this moment, she had been entirely on the back foot.

Her opponent was a mere high school student, while she was the captain of the world's strongest unit.

Naturally such pride had been there, but now more than that, the awareness that she was losing ground brought its own mental pressure.

If she didn't retaliate at least a little, she would be overpowered.

Unless one has an overwhelming defensive magic, in a magic battle offense was stronger than defense. So went the theory.

Lina felt the wind pressure weaken. It wasn't so much due to cancellation of the magic as the blast which occurred as a result; after all that compressed air had been released, it was little wonder the wind had dropped.

Lina gripped her combat knife in her right hand.

Her gun had been taken, but this knife capable of operating 'Molecular Divider' had not.

The armament device of the magic developed by the previous Sirius, and now the trump card of the Stars.

When materialised, this magic, similar to an extended virtual area, must surpass the opponent's interference power.

Furthermore, since winning by halves wasn't an option, it would actually have to be a rank higher.

At the very least however,

(This should be enough to get Miyuki's attention!)

With her left hand which was still flat on the ground, she scattered daggers where Miyuki couldn't see.

She canceled her inertial increase, then rising up at full speed,

(Molecular Divider)

On her knee, she swung her knife.

She activated the virtual area almost simultaneously. At that time, Lina felt an overwhelming interference strength surpassing anything she had ever seen burst into the space between her and Miyuki.

The virtual area, in the midst of being formed, was overrun by the torrent of interference.

She knew that she would be stopped. It might even be said she had counted on it.

"Dancing Blades!"

Even before confirming that Molecular Divider had been disabled, Lina activated her next magic.

Her discreetly scattered daggers rose and flew forwards in the blink of an eye.

By grazing the ground, they avoided the space dominated by Miyuki.

(If you're able to stop four blades attacking from the front and back in this darkness, please go ahead and try!)

Sensing magic tinged objects closing in at high speed Miyuki canceled her offensive magic sequence partway, and switched to an area defensive magic.

The daggers approaching Miyuki lost their flight momentum and fell to the ground.

Her magic which indiscriminately defended against all directions was more difficult than one which targeted an area, far more difficult than one which targeted individual objects, yet Miyuki as she was now could pull it off with ease.

It could even stop this attack filled with the magic power of the Sirius, Lina.

If her control had been tied up in Tatsuya's seal as usual, it would have been hard for her to defend against that.

She most likely wouldn't have been able to manage the control needed for such a dense technique.

If she had challenged Lina to a battle alone, she would have lost alone...thinking that, Miyuki offered a prayer of gratitude in her heart.

(Onii-sama is watching over me...I won't lose. I can't lose!)

Seeing her elaborately devised surprise attack crushed through sheer power, Lina felt a rising sense of both trepidation and exhilaration.

Her mind suddenly returned to that saccharine sweet, heartburn inducing sight from earlier.

At that time, she had thought he was merely messing around with the fight.

But at that time, Tatsuya had certainly whispered something to Miyuki.

Thinking about it, it was fully possible Tatsuya had been informing her about 'Dancing Blades'.

She had seen Tatsuya decompose five incoming blades at once.

It was not a sequence for any intermolecular force neutralising magic that she knew, but from the results, she guessed that it must have somehow undone the bonds holding molecules together.

But that wasn't the point.

What was critical was that it had targeted multiple projectiles closing in at the same time, and dealt with them at the same time. What had stopped her attack, was not Miyuki's strength alone.

(I see...so he won't make a move, but he'll go ahead and speak. Not bad!)

Miyuki thought.

I absolutely cannot lose.

Lina thought.

I'll have to go full force.

The two of them cried out at the same time.

"Miyuki!" "Lina!"

"This is it!"

The world froze.

The world burned.

The magic of the two repainted reality itself, as two worlds collided.

Glinting with crystal light, an endless plain of ice and snow.

Roaring with thunder, an infernal storm of fire and lightning.

A hell which froze the air in eternal winter, 'Niflheim'.

A hell which consumed the air in scorching purgatory, 'Muspelheim'.

On one hand, an area magic which slowed down the vibration of gas molecules freezing not only water vapour and carbon dioxide, but right down to nitrogen as well.

On the other hand, an area magic which decomposed gas molecules into plasma, and furthermore, by forcibly separating the ions from the electrons, created a high energy electromagnetic field.

The sheer cold cooled the plasma back into gas, and the molten plasma reverted the frozen air.

The fury of the two powers now clashing created an aurora on the ground.

It really was a very pretty sight.

Almost enough to make one forget that life and death hung in the balance.

Tatsuya, his finger on his CAD trigger, carefully scrutinised the scene. If either side lost control, he would immediately erase the spells.

He expected substantial difficulty in canceling the magic of these two at the same time, but he was a magician who specialised in restoration and decomposition. He fully intended to surpass such absurdity.

In the midst of that aurora, as fire and ice met in what seemed like an eternity of mutual destruction, in less than a minute the tide was revealed.

The cold air was expanding, and the plasma was shrinking.

In the first place, Miyuki was a magician who excelled in large scale magic over a wide area.

On the other hand Lina's power was focused on individual objects, excelling in severe magic on those.

From the beginning, this sort of engagement had favoured Miyuki.

Adding to that however Lina had already fought the vampire and then Tatsuya, making this her third consecutive battle.

Even though she herself was not aware of symptoms, fatigue was already setting in.

With her opponent holding the advantage and herself handicapped, the result was clear.

The match between Miyuki and Lina had never been a competition of magic power, but was to be decided by who could keep calm and make the most rational decisions.

"Kuh..."

She herself likely knew this as well. Lina groaned painfully.

And moved her hand to her back. She pulled out another armament device. Multicasting in this situation, however skilled a magician she may be, was pure suicide.

"That's enough, you two!"

Shouting out, Tatsuya pulled the trigger of his CAD.

His 'Gram Dispersion' dispelled both Miyuki's 'Niflheim' and Lina's 'Muspelheim' at the exact same time.

The cold and hot air rapidly mixed, creating a gale which would cause both frostbite and burns. Bracing himself for the severe pain he was sure was incoming, the storm of sheer cold and scorching heat was blocked right before him by an invisible wall.

"Onii-sama! That was far too reckless!"

Her face pale, Miyuki came running up.

Stunned, Lina could only stare.

For those two, protecting themselves from the thermal aftermath was a piece of cake regardless of fatigue. However, that sort of thing was impossible for Tatsuya. It was at times like these that Tatsuya, who looked with indifference on his own talents, was somewhat envious of the skills of ordinary magicians.

"My my...Tatsuya-kun, what will you do now?"

Having made no move to defend himself yet nevertheless appearing unharmed, Yakumo spoke in mock surprise. —No, looking at how muddy his disciple following after him was, he had likely dived into the ground. The so called Earth Release jutsu.

"Master...what do you mean?"

He knew how Yakumo had escaped the heat and cold, but he didn't understand the question. Towards Tatsuya who had replied straightforwardly, or rather reflexively, Yakumo showed a truly surprised face.

"Well, you know...the victory conditions had been decided as when one side surrenders, or is rendered incapacitated. This was a match originally conceived by you, and now that you've gone and wrecked it, what will you do?"

Tatsuya had no words to reply with.

In that situation, if he had not intervened it would have gone against the condition of 'no killing' and so he had no regrets concerning the intervention itself.

But the entire match after all had simply been an excuse to slip around regulations.

The fact was, their treatment of Lina was a very messy situation.

As an actual soldier, Lina had guaranteed rights as a prisoner of war. If she had remained incognito that wouldn't have been an issue, but Tatsuya had heard from her own mouth that she was the 'Stars captain', and a 'USNA army major' not to mention acknowledging it himself before that. Her rights as a POW couldn't be ignored.

Even without a legal state of war, practically speaking anyone captured during a military operation had the rights of a POW. Adding to that, Tatsuya's group as civilians technically weren't allowed to apprehend the soldier Lina.

If he could prove his connection to the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion they could take her prisoner, but unfortunately there was no chance his highly classified status would be brought to light over an incident of this scale.

If they interrogated or detained Lina without legitimate right, they could only offer the USNA political excuses. This wasn't even beginning to consider punishment.

Of course on the other hand, they could raise the issue of Lina attacking civilians, but unfortunately a magician's rights to be protected as a civilian were still greatly restricted. In a court of international law, Tatsuya and co would be heavily disadvantaged.

Yet that being said, considering the future, there was no way they could just let her go without doing anything. How in the world will we sort out this situation...Tatsuya thought as he felt a headache approach.

"It's fine as my loss."

However, there was no need for that worry. A helping hand extended from the most unexpected place.

"At that moment, I most certainly was being overpowered. If I had transferred capacity to another magic in that state, I likely could have been overwhelmed by Miyuki's magic and lost my life. At the least, I would have been in no condition to fight further."

Turning to Tatsuya and Miyuki, Lina gracefully acknowledged her own defeat.

"So it's my loss, Miyuki. Tatsuya, I have no intention of any further undignified resistance."

However, the feeling of relief was premature.

"It was a promise. I'll answer whatever you ask. However..."

"However what?"

"However, my replies will only be 'yes' or 'no'. Anything which cannot be answered by that, I cannot disclose. You interfered and changed the conditions agreed to between Miyuki and I, so let me change our conditions my way this much, Tatsuya."

She was rather more stubborn than he had thought.

At Lina who was smiling so radiantly one would hardly think she had lost, Tatsuya could only nod.

(To be continued)

Afterword

Once again, truly, thank you very much to those who read "Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei". For the first-timers, I would like to take this opportunity to say please put up with me until the end.

The subtitle this time is "Visitor Arc". A variety of "visitors" pulls the protagonists into a maelstrom of incidents. A bigwig guest character also makes their appearance. The protagonists also have a victim amongst them. I showed, in this case, a complex development of a three-way struggle + a. It is also slightly like romance novels (feel free to object). This way, it will tell a slightly different story of magical high school students compared to the previous eight volumes, but I think it surely will be well received.

Now then, I shall leave everybody with something unacceptable. –I am sorry but this time, the story is divided into three [(I), (II) & (III)] separate volumes. There will surely be some backlash from those who say, "but the Reminiscence Chapter was one volume". I could not fit the "Visitor Chapter" into just two volumes. No, rather, to Dengeki Bunko, (as long as there is not too much content) there is no maximum page count so there was the possibility that I could have finish it off I think but… due to various circumstances, it ended up as you see. You may have to wait a little more than usual until the episode's end but, accordingly, it is my intention and thought to create something that everyone will be able to fully enjoy.

The schedule for this one has been tighter than usual. I predict the schedule for (II) and (III) will be busy. To all those involved, I apologise in advance. And I also thank you. So that this story may reach all those who continue to read it with pleasure without further delay, please, definitely cooperate with me next time as well.

Now then, to all the readers who took this book in hand, once again, my gratitude. I pray that next time too, the "Visitor Chapter (II)" will catch your eyes.

Satou Tsutomu

References

1. ↑ Xenophobic: Anti-foreigner
2. ↑ Kokonoe: 九重 includes the character for 'nine'.
3. ↑ Tatemae: 建前 eg PR, the thing from Henneko

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